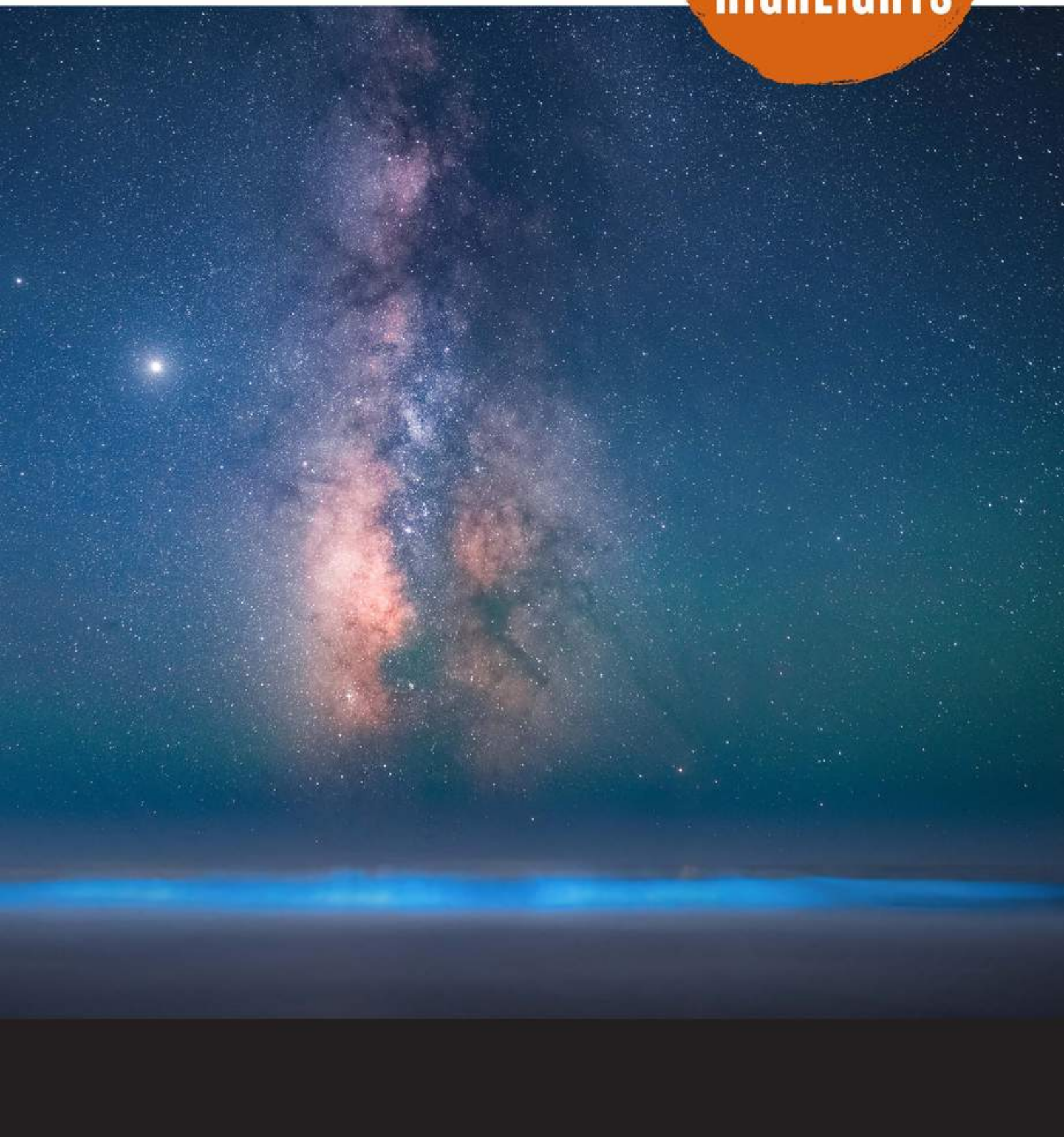
Tikkun

POLITICS+SPIRITUALITY+CULTURE

A Jewish and Interfaith Prophetic Voice to Heal and Transform the World

2022 HIGHLIGHTS



Tikkun Magazine is ...

... a vehicle for spreading a new consciousness. We call it a spiritual progressive worldview.

But what is that?

What do you mean by "spiritual"?

You can be spiritual and still be an atheist or agnostic. To be spiritual, you don't have to believe in God or accept New Age versions of spirituality. You don't need to give up science or your critical faculties. We use the word "spiritual" to describe all aspects of reality that cannot be subject to empirical verification or measurement: everything pertaining to ethics, aesthetics, music, art, philosophy, religion, poetry, literature, dance, love, generosity, and joy. We reject the notion that everything worthy of consideration to guide our personal lives and our economic and political arrangements must be measurable.

What's a Spiritual Progressive?

To be a spiritual progressive is to agree that our public institutions, corporations, government policies, laws, education system, healthcare system, legal system, and even many aspects of our personal lives should be judged "efficient, rational, or productive" (or to put it more succinctly, "successful") to the extent that they maximize love, care, kindness, generosity, and ethical and environmentally sustainable behavior. We call this our **New Bottom Line**.

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If you are willing to help promote this New Bottom Line for our society, you are a spiritual progressive. We invite you to join our Network of Spiritual Progressives at www.spiritual progressives.org.

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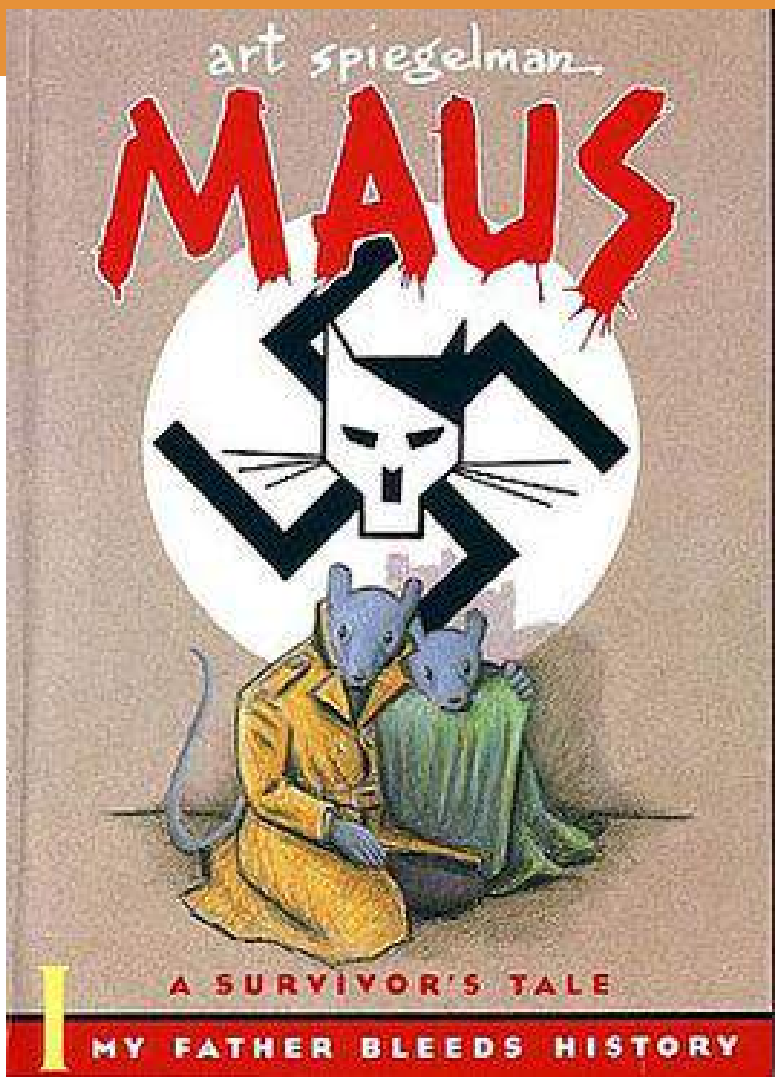
On Hell Planet: Teaching Maus to Teens

PHILIP GRAUBART



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MANY YEARS AGO, I GOT IN TROUBLE for teaching *Maus*, the Holocaust graphic novel. Not because of nudity or swear words, the reasons a school board in Tennessee gave for banning the book from its curriculum. At the time of the complaint, I'd read the book at least ten times, and I wouldn't have been able to recall a single naked character or one instance of salty language. The parents of my student who objected to the book weren't concerned about profanity, or pornographic pictures. They were terrified of how one particular theme might affect their psychologically frail daughter: suicide. And they were right to be concerned. Anyone teaching *Maus* to high school students should approach the novel's suicides with care and sensitivity. These disturbing self-annihilations haunt the novel, and they've haunted me, and probably anyone who's actually read and engaged with Art Spiegelman's strange masterpiece.

Two suicides are central to the narrative. The first occurs in the terrifying "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" section, a separate graphic piece Spiegelman published many years before *Maus*, and then later inserted into the novel. The short, 4-page, black and white sequence – the only part of the story which features real human beings and not animals – portrays the suicide of Art's mother and its aftermath. Art's father Vladek, Maus' chief narrator, finds his wife, Art's mother, dead in a bathtub. Spiegelman draws himself here in a striped jail uniform, a prisoner not merely of his grief, but his maddening guilt, when friends and family imply that he was responsible for his mother's death. A cousin scolds him, saying "Now you cry! Better you cried when your mother was still alive!" In the final panels, we see Art in a single cramped jail cell surrounded by an endless warren of barred cells screaming "You murdered me Mommy, and you left me here to take the rap." The artwork for "Hell Planet" is as creepy, grotesque, and as nightmarish as the Auschwitz body piles in the later sections of *Maus*. The psychiatrist who informs Art of his mother's suicide becomes a demonic, cackling skeleton. Gigantic coffins take over 4 separate panels.

Spiegelman's subconscious thoughts – "MENOPAUSAL DEPRESSION. HITLER DID IT! MOMMY! BITCH" - swirl through a panel depicting Art's mother lying in a bathtub filled with blood. Ironically, the only subtlety in the section is also the one actual instance of nudity in the novel. Art drew his mother naked in the bathtub. But you have to study the images closely to notice the nude breasts. The other grotesqueries overshadow it. In 25 years of reading the book, I never spotted Anja Spiegelman's naked body until I read the Tennessee School Board's complaint.

Anja's suicide is important to the novel because Anja's story is the great unresolved tension in the book, the issue that perpetually divides Art and his father. Art interviews his Holocaust survivor father throughout the novel, but he also yearns to tell his dead mother's story. He discovers that Anja kept a diary, and he becomes obsessed – "I have to find that diary". When, at the end of Volume One, his father admits that he burned all his mother's papers, Art explodes, clenches his fist, and seems ready to punch his father. He quickly calms down, but the last word in the volume, the first published edition of *Maus*, is Art mumbling that his father is a "murderer" – in other words that he murdered his mother by burning her diary. Why exactly did Anja kill herself a full 25 years after liberation? How did she experience the horrors that her husband Vladek Spiegelman described? We'll never know, and that ignorance prevents any real reconciliation between father and son, and any remotely satisfying resolution in the novel.

The second suicide – possibly as important – is really a murder-suicide. Spiegelman depicts it just a few pages after the "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" sequence. In Vladek's telling, he and Anja send Richieu their five-year-old child, to a "safer" ghetto, to live with relatives. When the Nazis are poised to liquidate that ghetto, Richieu's aunt Tosha feeds the child and another cousin poison, and then kills herself. We can only imagine how this murdered martyred brother haunted Art's childhood – a brother he never met. We know for sure that Richieu's mini-Masada narrative loomed large for Art, because he dedicated the second volume of Maus to him, and included a real-life, non-animal photo of the boy on the dedication page.

The suicides form a lens which allow us to see other characters more sharply. For much of the book, Vladek is insufferable. He spooks the young Art with Holocaust horror stories. He nags and irritates his adult son over a host of minor issues – his coat, eating, a piece of wire. He plagues his second wife Mala with a never-ending stream of complaints. But he's undeniably a survivor. He pedals on his exercise bike while Art smokes. He walks every day. During the worst of the Holocaust – homeless on Poland's winter streets, or inhaling Auschwitz's chimneys, he finds creative ways to survive. He's the one who *didn't* kill himself and with that bare fact he redeems himself and commands our sympathy. Similarly, Art is the brother who was *not* the victim of a murder-suicide. His life becomes painfully complicated because of his Holocaust survivor parents, but he's never put in his brother Richieu's position. Art, like Harry Potter, like his father, is the boy who lived.

It was the day after we read Richieu's story that my student Ellen's (not her real name) mother phoned me. She didn't want to meet at my office in the synagogue because she didn't want anyone to know she was seeking out a rabbi, her daughter's confirmation teacher. So we met at Starbucks. She told me about her daughter's anxiety disorder. How tied up it seemed to be with chronic depression. She'd never tried suicide, but she'd thought about it, and discussed it openly, terrorizing her parents. I ignored my steaming latte listening to Ellen's Mom. My

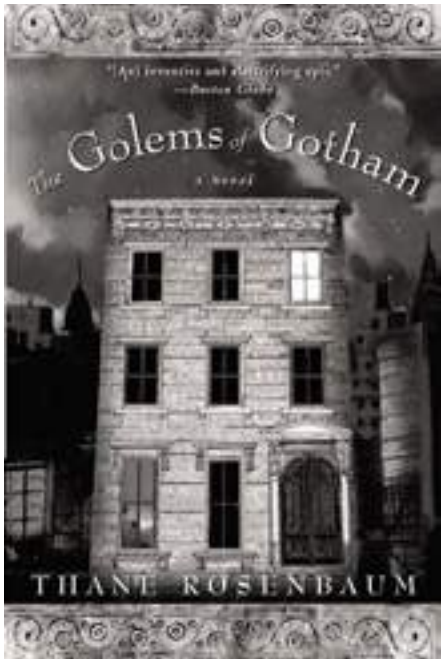
first response was okay, no problem, we'll skip *Maus*. I'll find something happy to read, maybe Moshe Waldoks *Big Book of Jewish Humor*. Or we'll watch Mel Brooks movies. The idea of the class was to engage the students with Jewish ideas and identity, not depress them.

But Ellen's mother said, no. Unlike the school board in Tennessee, she didn't want to remove the book from my curriculum. It's important, she said, to teach young Jews about the Holocaust. Several of her relatives were victims or survivors. Understanding what happened "over there" is an essential element of Jewish identity, she said, ignoring her tall black coffee. And you can't teach the Holocaust honestly without bumping up against uncomfortable feelings – sadness, fear, rage, despair. Teach the book, she urged me. But don't skip over the suicide scenes. Talk about them. Analyze what brings people to that level of desperation. Ellen, she said, needs to talk openly about her struggles. At least that's what her therapist was recommending. And, in any case, she said, we can't control what books Ellen reads in school, or at synagogue, or on her own. But if she's going to encounter suicide in literature, better it be with a rabbi and sympathetic peers who can discuss the subject with wisdom and compassion.

I didn't necessarily agree that knowing the Holocaust constituted an "essential" element in Jewish identity. I'd chosen *Maus* for that confirmation class because I thought it was a book of sly genius, and that teens would enjoy learning Jewish history from a comic book. But I did agree that if we were going to teach the Holocaust – and we were, we do – then we couldn't elide unpleasantness. No trigger warnings could salve Babi Yar's murder pits or Treblinka's gas chambers or the massacres at the Warsaw ghetto.

Or suicide. Suicide is a not-so-hidden theme of Holocaust history and literature. Many members of the Jewish councils, whose job it was to provide lists of Jews for deportation, killed themselves, including Warsaw's Adam Czerniakow and Vilna's Jacob Genz. The suicide rates were high in the death camps. And what was the Warsaw Ghetto rebellion if not a mass suicide mission? And, perhaps most hauntingly for those who study Holocaust literature, several Holocaust writers died by suicide. Thane Rosenbaum noticed this and crafted a novel – *The Golems of Gotham* – featuring the ghosts of Primo Levi, Jerzy Kosinski, Paul Celan, Jean Amery, Piotr Rawicz, and Thadeus Borowski, all of whom survived the Shoah, wrote about their experiences, and then killed themselves years after liberation.

The phenomenon of the suicide writer suggests there's a kind of long covid effect to the Holocaust, especially if you immerse yourself deeply into it. Thirty years later, the fumes linger, can still murder you, or induce you to murder yourself. This is all grim stuff, but Rosenbaum handles the material with surprising humor and



grace. In *Golems of Gotham*, the revived writers comically transform Manhattan into a kind of

anti-Holocaust theme park. Showers stop working. Tattoo parlors disappear. Striped clothing is outlawed. Even the New York Yankee pinstripes vanish, irritating shortstop Derek Jeter.

And there's an unexpected happy ending. The first paragraph of the book describes a shocking suicide. A Holocaust survivor – protagonist Oliver Levin's father – shoots himself while performing an aliyah in the synagogue on Shabbat. He spills blood and brains on the Torah. Seconds later his wife, Oliver's mother, also a survivor, swallows a cyanide pill. Naturally, these suicides haunt Oliver, who's already traumatized by a childhood listening to his parents' tales of horror. He clings to normalcy enough to marry and father a child. But divorce and a writer's block push him into a suicidal depression. His daughter Ariel, seeking to rescue her father, performs a kabbalistic séance, summoning the spirits of Oliver's parents, who drag along the suicide writers. The book is funny but darkly cynical, sometimes verging on the nihilistic, especially in the character of Rabbi Vered, yet another survivor, who dedicates his life to denouncing God and religion, and later also kills himself. Until the last page, it seems possible, even likely, that Oliver will join his parents in suicide. But he doesn't. Ariel's spell works. The suicide ghosts turn out to be good fairies, spreading life instead of death. Oliver, in contrast to his parents, but very much like Vladek and Art, emerges as another boy who lived.

While discussing the suicides in *Maus*, I read Ellen's confirmation class passages from *The Golems of Gotham*. I wanted to contextualize the suicides, demonstrate that it was possible to transcend the heavyweight of history, inject some measure of hope and light into this smoky subject, show that both *Maus* and *The Golems of Gotham* teach the possibility and importance of choosing life. Even though I wasn't at all sure that was the point of either novel. I just thought it would help to throw a few laughs into the mix. And I wanted to reach Ellen.

Years later I asked her if I succeeded. We'd gotten back in touch during the pandemic when she found me on Facebook. She was getting married, and she wondered if I would perform the wedding – an informal ceremony, masked, in her parent's backyard. I was delighted with the news and the request, and for weeks we traded Facebook notes on our lives. Since I was getting ready to teach *Maus* again, this time to a high school class at a Jewish day school, I asked her what she remembered about her confirmation class. "Not much," she replied. "Those were horrible years. Honestly, I don't think I paid much attention in class. I was only attending because my parents made me. I do remember that you were very kind to me. That I remember."

Huh, I thought. I'd pretty much designed the curriculum for her, but she didn't notice. I asked her if the class, or even just the book *Maus*, affected her thoughts about suicide. It took her several days to respond. "It's funny," she wrote. "I don't remember being suicidal at all. I asked my parents, and they back you up; I guess I had threatened it, but I don't remember doing so. I was probably making it up. Or I've blocked it out. But, honestly, even if I was genuinely suicidal, I don't think a single class or book would have made a difference. But I don't remember a lot from those times. Maybe you helped. Who knows?"

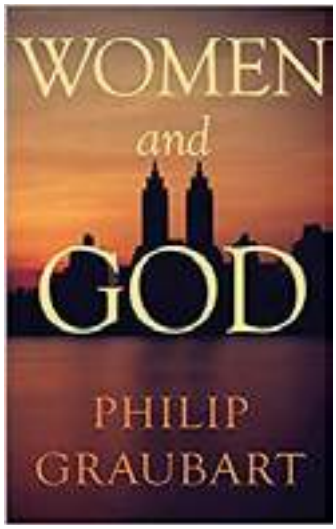
Indeed, who knows? I dropped the subject from our correspondence. But I was still attentive on the subject of suicide when I taught the class. I warned the parents and asked for their feedback. As Ellen's mother had urged all those years ago, I lingered over the Hell Planet and Richeau sections of the book, leaving plenty of time for class discussion and engagement through assignments. When the news broke

about the Tennessee School Board, I could only chuckle sadly. They're concerned about nudity and swear words, and I'm up at night worrying about the suicides.

As it happened, the same semester I taught Mous, I also taught a course which dealt with the prototypical Jewish mass suicide story: Masada. I recalled that we used to teach the story as heroic defiance. But now, Jewish educators are encouraged to interrogate the story, suggest alternatives, and point out that the very agency the Masada victims employed in slaughtering each other could have been used for other choices. That semester, I also thought about the suicides in my family, my sister-in-law, mother-in-law, and the suicide note I found written by my mother – she never followed through with it, and we never talked about it. I'm besieged by suicide, I thought. But there's no point in burying the subject, or engaging in denial. In our frighteningly connected, meta world, a world where teen anxiety has become epidemic, young people know all about suicide. It's a terrible topic, but one we can't ignore. And, I believe, it's a key to understanding the Shoah, and the lessons we derive from it, particularly for this generation who will grow up never having met a survivor. If we're going to teach the Holocaust – and we are – we of course must allow for nudity and profanity, but those aren't the problem. The problem – one of the problems, at least – is suicide. Even so, we'll teach it.

I couldn't perform Ellen's wedding ceremony. It would have involved travel, and, during those acute pandemic times, I wasn't ready for that. But she posted photos from her parents' springtime garden. With its red and white roses, thick, deep, green grass, and leafy oak trees, it was bursting with life. Under a virginal white huppah, a handsome groom, young and filled with energy, wrapped in a brand-new tallit, lifted the white veil from his glowing bride. Look at them, I thought to myself, a tear escaping from one of my eyes. Look at this young Jewish couple. Look at my former sad student, this rejoicing bride with the widest smile I'd ever seen. Look at her now. The woman who lived.

PHILIP GRAUBART is a rabbi, writer, and teacher. He's held leadership positions at several synagogues, the National Yiddish Book Center, the Shalom Hartman Institute, and the San Diego Jewish Academy, where he now teaches. His latest book is *Women and God*.



Gayatri Malhotra on Unsplash

The U.S. Hypocrisy on Ukraine

STEPHEN ZUNES

Though U.S. and NATO policy in recent years has contributed to the current tragedy unfolding in Ukraine, responsibility rests unequivocally with the Kremlin. It is an illegal war of aggression which has quite deservedly resulted in worldwide condemnation.

There's no excusing the invasion, but the double standards and hypocrisy coming out of Washington, D.C., are quite striking.

Media coverage has been sympathetic to the civilian victims of the invasion and the Ukrainian resistance. Again, while it raises questions about why there hasn't been a comparable response when the victims weren't white, Christian Europeans, or when the aggressor was the United States or a U.S. ally, it is refreshing to see this acknowledgement of the horrors of war.

There's no excusing the invasion, but the double standards and hypocrisy coming out of Washington, D.C., are quite striking.

For example, President Joe Biden has correctly asserted that "nations have a right to sovereignty and territorial integrity." The United States, however, has been the only government in the world to formally recognize Israel's illegal annexation of Syria's Golan Heights and Morocco's annexation of the entire nation of Western Sahara, both seized by force in defiance of the United Nations.

If Biden really believed that countries have a right to self-determination he would not refuse to recognize this right for Western Sahara, as the International Court of Justice and virtually every country on Earth has called for, nor would he refuse to support Palestinian self-determination outside of the parameters agreed to by their Israeli occupiers, the current prime

minister of which has categorically ruled out Palestinian statehood.

In addition, Biden's claim that the United States "always stands up to bullies" would be news to the Yemenis, Lebanese, Palestinians, and others who have been subjected to massive military attacks by U.S.-armed allies. His insistence that "we stand for freedom" is contradicted by his administration's support for brutal dictatorships in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and elsewhere. Criticism of Russia's veto of the U.N. Security Council resolution condemning the invasion rings hollow in light of successive U.S. vetoes of resolutions challenging the U.S. invasions of Grenada and Panama, U.S. attacks on Nicaragua, and Israel's invasions of Lebanon.

And, of course, Biden's insistence that countries must not invade other nations on false pretenses is incredibly hypocritical considering his strident support as a Senator for the U.S. invasion of Iraq on the deceptive grounds that Saddam Hussein had somehow amassed vast arsenal of chemical and biological weapons, a nuclear program, and sophisticated delivery systems.

Although Biden is certainly correct to challenge Russian President Vladimir Putin's claims that Ukraine constituted enough of a threat to Russian national security that his government had to invade, Biden's past puts him in a poor position to lead the international response to Russian aggression.

The history of U.S. militarism, imperialism, and false narratives has led some on the antiwar left to rationalize Russian aggression and exaggerate Western responsibility. A number of forums and rallies in the weeks preceding the invasion calling for a no war in Ukraine focused on the nonexistent threat of U.S. military intervention while ignoring the very real and growing threat of a Russian invasion. Subsequently, some have tried to blame Washington for Moscow's actions.

It is certainly true that the decision by the United States to break what appears to have been a promise to the Kremlin that NATO would not expand eastward contributed to Putin's paranoid nationalism. Incorporating former Warsaw Pact countries and three former Soviet republics into the Western alliance could be seen as unnecessarily provocative, particularly in light of repeated invasions of Russia from Western Europe through Ukraine in 1812, 1914, 1919, and 1941.

Even many critics of the United States' massive arms transfers to countries around the world argue that a democratic nation faced with a full-scale invasion justifies military aid.

A strong argument could also be made that the crisis could have been avoided if NATO had been willing to rule out membership for Ukraine, granting the nation a neutral status similar to Finland and Austria during the Cold War. At the same time, Putin's rewriting of history and his insistence that Ukraine is inherently part of Russia, along with his decision to launch a full-scale invasion, is indicative that he would have done so regardless.

Putin appears to have at least some U.S. supporters. Not only are many in the Trump wing of the Republican Party embracing his autocratic reactionary nationalism, but there are also people on the left who have embraced him simply because he opposes the United States.

Despite claims to the contrary, the United States was not responsible for the popular 2014 uprising that ousted the Ukraine's democratically elected but increasingly autocratic

and notoriously corrupt President Viktor Yanukovych. The limited funding of some opposition groups was no more responsible for the pro-Russian leader's ouster than Soviet support for armed leftist groups was responsible for socialist revolutions during the Cold War. It's as wrong to deny agency to Ukrainians as it was to deny it to Salvadorans.

And despite overreach by some U.S. officials in trying to influence the makeup of the provisional government, subsequent elections have brought to power popular representative governments. The current president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who won by a landslide, is Jewish and an ethnic Russian, making claims that the Ukrainian government is controlled by Nazis committing genocide against Russian-speakers particularly absurd.

As with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a major setback to nonproliferation efforts. In the 1994 Budapest agreement, Ukraine agreed to give up its vast nuclear arsenal inherited from the Soviet Union in return for guarantees by Russia and others of its territorial integrity.

So how should the United States respond? Even many critics of the United States' massive arms transfers to countries around the world argue that a democratic nation faced with a full-scale invasion justifies military aid. At this time, however, it is unclear whether it would be enough to defeat the Russian invasion or just cause more bloodshed. Perhaps more effective would be massive nonviolent civil resistance, which would make an occupied Ukraine ungovernable like the kind that freed the Baltic Republics from Russian occupation in the early 1990s.

Meanwhile, in Russia, antiwar protests have broken out and leading scientists, writers, intellectuals, sports figures, and others are openly challenging the Kremlin. More than 1,700 protesters were arrested in just the incursion's first few days.

In contrast to the Soviet era, Russia is far more dependent on the increasingly globalized economy, so the economic sanctions are already hurting, particularly the oligarchs on whose support Putin depends. And the bravery of Ukrainians in both the armed and unarmed resistance has slowed and, in some cases, even reversed the Russian advance.

It is unclear what the right course is for the United States to take, and Washington's hypocrisy and double standards has weakened U.S. leadership on this issue. However, unlike many international crises, the world appears united in opposing Russian aggression and it is likely Putin will ultimately be defeated.

The only question is, how long it will take, and how many people will die in the meantime?

STEVEN ZUNES is a professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco. A regular contributor to The Progressive, he serves as an Editorial Fellow at the Tikkun Institute.

An Essay on Love

REBECCA ADAMS

I BEGAN WRITING ABOUT LOVE IN AN EMPTY hotel lobby cafe after tripping on my way inside and falling on my knees - perhaps a brief, accidental prayer. I tapped onto a screen some broken sentences, while paramilitary and hate groups were gathering in Washington: preparation for the murderous assault on the Capitol was happening as dusk fell in Melbourne, on January 5th, 2021.

Rising to leave a couple of hours later, my second coffee finished, twilight had fallen: dusk, dreaming its shadowy dreams, embracing both the gum trees and the introduced Europeans oaks.

I was frightened that night, without knowing why: a familiar fear to me now, bone-marrow deep. Wordless, vertiginous.

Tiny, mysterious shells or labyrinths – the *semi-circular canals* - curve within our inner ears. Almost filled with fluid, they sense the movements of our heads: they tell us when we lose or find our balance, and are connected to our cochleae, with which we hear. Vibrations of air are perceived as sounds. Surely the cochleae must also feel vibrations in the ether: from across the world, from across time, from below our feet, and from miles beneath the earth. For we know, in a distant and mysterious way, the rumbles of mining - metals, coal, and iron ore that we should not be taking from the earth anymore.

Breathe, I said to myself.

John Singer Sargent, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Breathe, don't panic. You're giddy, don't fall over again, it's dark now.

Round.... like a circle in a spiral, like a wheel within a wheel, Never ending or beginning on an ever-spinning reel

- *The Windmills of Your Mind,* theme song from the *1968 The Thomas Crwon Affair*

My parents played a love song when I was a child. It still plays within me, *The Windmills of Your Mind*, the whirling 'long baroque melody' of Michael Legrand, over and over.

I play it as I drive home: dark now. Noel Harrison (1968) sings it for me. My playlist knows I need comfort, and I sing also with Harrison - although I never get the words right, and although it's not at all a happy song: memories and are love lost, compass points go missing. But it revolves me, the melody turns me around, and reminds me of love.

Love is many-meaning-ed, and there are infinite splendours and pains in Love, every kind.

We think of romantic love at first, of course - its wild, utter insistence, its longing and terror, its gorgeousness. It pulls us from the too-cool twilight that is our inner solitude towards the warmth of a heart that resonates, lips threaded with scarlet, moments of our souls being recognized. Pomegranates, figs, fragrant oils, *The Song of Songs*. We are moved – not geographically (although I have moved to other cities for love) - but in relation to our own positions about ourselves. I see possibilities in you that you cannot see without my eyes. And both of us beneath the canopy of love, you do the same for me.

There is a midrash (teaching) about a dark time in Hebraic history. Pharoah had decreed that all male Hebrew children born - children of slaves - would be killed. The men's spirits were crushed and all despaired. They left for their work in the fields or the quarries without returning at night to be with their wives. In defiant response, the women organized: they pummelled and shone their cooking pots into mirrors and visited their husbands with food. They pointed at the men's reflections in the mirrors, made them gaze at themselves, and told them: "See how beautiful you are, my husband! How beautiful!" The men began to laugh - and returned.

How beautiful we all are. All human beings.

Romantic love gets a bad rap these days: we're told it is type of madness, an addiction, a burst of dopamine and oxytocin: destined to last a year or two at most. I am deeply suspicious of this story. What's wrong with love lasting forever?

Neo-liberalism, capitalism-on-steroids, is one thing getting in the way of people loving each other all their lives. "I'd be *better off* with someone else," we say: or "another person would be *a better deal* for me," - a marketplace of bodies and beings. And the world of work makes us exhausted by the end of the day, with little of us left to be loving to our partners when we get home at night. Or, working from home, we're exhausted already.

One of my favourite books, *Can Love Last?* by psychoanalyst Stephen A. Mitchell, poses the question of whether we unconsciously domesticate love against its will. Perhaps we make love cozy and even boring, Mitchell suggests, so that the demands of romantic love (its creativity, intensity, and its insistence that we see each other clearly) cease to ask so much of us.

Following Mitchell – he died at the height of his creative powers, at fifty-three years old, leaving Relational Psychoanalysis (a "turn" in theory and practice that he largely created) bereft without him - I say that the domestication and farming of animals doesn't seem to have done them much good overall, and love's domestication should be with similar ambivalence and caution. Is being 'in love' a state of creative wildness, a brumby galloping through wind-tossed trees, plunging through the hills and valleys of our moods and personalities, disappearing for weeks or more - but always returning?

Of course, we're frightened of being trampled and left in the dust. Love requires so much courage.

Romantic love is a template, a study, for all other types of love. Because Love is impossible to speak of as a whole, I must write in fragments, in pieces of mosaic. Yesterday, digging in my garden, I tipped over a thick plaster tile, one side painted, gilded, lovely, with images of strange birds, flowers, vines. It smashed on the tiles of the patio: small and large pieces, but probably not too many to glue together, even though I was careless with the smallest. Writing and talking about Love becomes like that. Fragments, circles, spirals. We know and feel love to be One Thing (although not a 'thing',)

but inevitably, a straight line of words kaleidoscopes it, except in the greatest poems – which still mostly shatter it. Language cannot capture the ineffable, of course: the teacher points to the moon, but the pointing finger is not what the disciple should look at. So, I watch my cat, Clementine, as she rubs her chin along the side of my laptop: is she pointing with her nose to the empty page? Perhaps she wants her lunch. Her carnal self is a teacher also, reminding me of my body, my fingers on the keyboard, this hard wooden chair, the delicious croissant dipped in coffee I've just eaten.

Outside, I know the skyscrapers and city offices are silent, Covid-quieted. And yet still they build apartments, more and more, although what they build remains indifferent, much less useful than Palaeolithic standing stones which at least had probable astronomical purpose. The tall buildings are stony in their unassailable heights and their logic that *it has to be like this*, and their statement that *this* what we are: competitors in a Hobbesian world where without government life would be nasty, brutal, and short. But Western governments tend to favour corporations (ironically named, since corporations are not corporeal - yet corporations are treated like persons in American law, and increasingly in ours) rather than supporting people in caring for each other or investing in Love.

Over twenty years ago I returned from psychiatry training in the US, and scribbled this in a notebook:

> "This is what I learnt in seven years - a truth so simple we all know it. It is written on our flesh and engraved so deeply on our hearts that even after years of 'education', of being conditioned into believing the madness that we are all separate and alone, and after almost endless enforced submission to the idols of money and 'success', we recognize it almost instantly, remembering it as if it had never been forgotten (sometimes it takes mudslides, storms, bushfires, raging tides that sweep our homes away, but then we remember) --- **Our fundamental need and purpose is to give and receive love**. Our submission to 'economic rationalism' is not rational, nor separate from mental illness. A culture that values profit above all cannot even grant coherent meaning to 'us-together' and our increasingly desperate reach for meaning, love, and purposeful work."

In Love – romantic or otherwise – we recognize another person as a being just like ourselves. You are a being, in the same way, I am a being - creaturely, with salty tears, salty blood: and as I do, you long for love, peace, and happiness. And yet you are also different, preciously different, and ultimately unknowable.

(*Are* there individuals? Can we exist without each other? Winnicott said "There is no such thing as a mother and a baby."[1])

The opposite of every great truth is another great truth, including this one. So, paradoxes abound - not to confound us, but to push for impossible resolution or evolution, and illuminate something that is darkly hidden behind the many swirling veils of ideology, the smokescreens of coal stations, the many machineries of extreme capitalism.

We, the 99%, are free to sell our labour as long as we sell it for nothing much.

We are free to imagine the scenes in Netflix series, series seven, episode five, but usually unfree to imagine a world of Love and equality. Love is not in capitalism's thesaurus of possible synonyms or concepts. Instead, capitalism teaches and un-sacredly preaches (with millions upon googles of images, pundits, tik-toks, Murdoch Inc., etc.,) a propaganda so nearly perfect hardly any of us notice that we

are breathing hot air. Nor are we able to question the assumption that we are fundamental-ly alone and that we must compete for material goods and status on a (hallucinated) level playing-field. No wonder so many of us become depressed, anxious, addicted, or psychotic, and privately believe that we are 'losers.'

We cannot sell Love. It is the one thing that can never be for sale.

> Lovers walk along the shore and leave their footprints in the sand
>
> Is the sound of distant drumming just the fingers of your hand?

Today is the anniversary of the attack on the Capitol in Washington. Trump is down, but he will be back - we have not seen the last of him, or his ilk. His party, once that of Lincoln, has utterly disgraced itself. He or his daughter will be back in 2024, and our American sisters and brothers will need to be ready. Damage has been done to our Australian democracy from Trump's example, and from the Murdoch media empire (suddenly, "Murdoch" reminds me of Moloch, the 'god' who demanded the sacrifice of children. Remember Ginsberg's Howl ?) Thus, from Canberra, the march towards death by fossil fuels continues, oh-so-very-slightly slowed in pace, and Ministers and Senators do not resign when shown to be corrupt. All over the world, totalitarian governments seem to be in ascendence.

> *Please read Timothy Snyder's **On Tyranny** because we may need to know his twenty points for resistance by heart, gut, and immediately.*

I want to walk in the Botanical Gardens now. I think of white blossoms, falling, falling, covering me in their glorious impossibility, in their luminous softness. Suddenly, I see an impressionist painting by John Singer Sargent inside my eyes where children's faces are brightened by the orange glow of lanterns, on a long-ago purple evening, somewhere in America.

Summertime/and the living isn't so easy, with-

out knowing how to love each other.

I read a letter from George Sand to Flaubert in 1871:

> "And what, you want me to stop loving? You want me to say that I have been mistaken all my life, that humanity is contemptible, hateful, that has always been and always will be so?
>
> ...
>
> When one sees the patient writhing in agony is there any consolation in understanding his illness thoroughly? ...
>
> Humanity is not a vain word. Our life is composed of love, and not to love is to cease to live.
>
> ... Past grandeurs have no longer a place to take in the history of men. It is all over with kings who exploit the peoples; it is all over with exploited people who have consented to their own abasement.

That is why we are so sick and why my heart is broken.

... Let us love one another or die.

.... You want me to see these things with a stoic indifference?

No, a hundred times no. Humanity is outraged in me and with me. We must not dissimulate nor try to forget this indignation which is one of the most passionate forms of love."

Everything that is wrong with the world, everything, is due to vicissitudes of love. All the hatred, racism, war, fear. All of these are secondary to power elites making sure we cannot love or connect in solidarity.

But what is to be done?

- Rosa Luxemburg knew. Many people know.

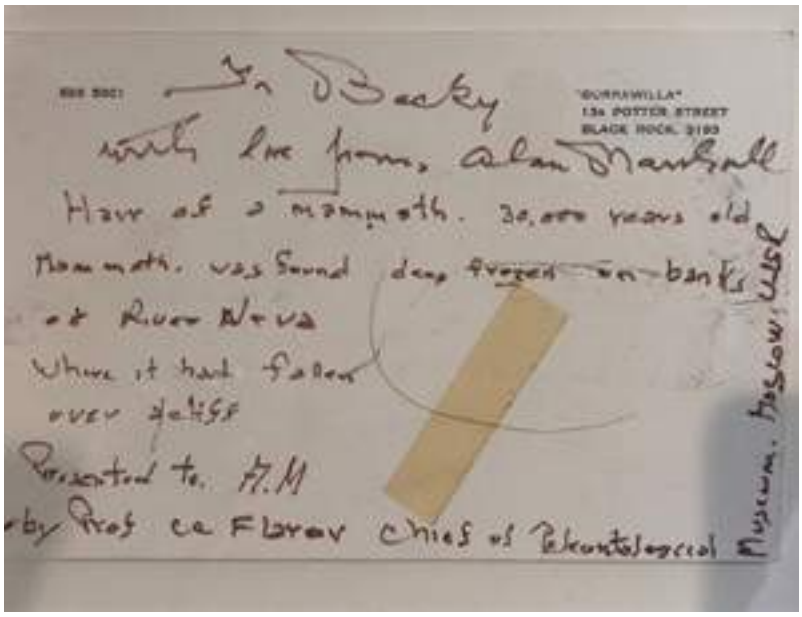
Remember. Remember everything, our father said. We were two little children in our knickers on a hot summer's day, our back garden loud with cicadas' chirr, Meaghan and I running screeching with joy and the shock of sudden cold water on our skin as we ran through the rotating sprinkler's moving reach, its slow, chh, chh, forward sound: the sudden, fast clacking back, staccato; the water making rainbows, arcing colour in the friction be-tween sun, air, water. I stopped, noticing the sudden quiet seriousness of our father's face - he had been laughing, a moment ago. - *Remember*, he said, *remember everything*. He was young: thirty-two, at most.

How did he know, at that age, that love and memory are joined? How did he know that remembering is a form of love?

Patti Smith knows it. When she loves a dead poet or a writer, she reads them over and over, and will eventually pay her respects at their graves. Smith's *Devotion* is her book about the love in memory. My second name comes from a gravestone, which my child-parents found before the cemetery was demolished. The brown, roughly hewed stone had no dates, but said merely: *This is E's grave*.

Against Forgetting is an anthology of poetry by Carolyn Forché, poems witnessing the wars, atrocities, and genocides of the twentieth century. Forché knows that to witness is to bear the unbearable with another and survive, as they did. And is an act of righteousness. It is proper. I pay my respects to the dead when I pick the book from the shelf, but I can rarely bring myself to open it. It is hard to bear witness: it is painful to remember history. But when we do, we uphold the truth. And truth is another form of love, or a love song:

Alan Marshall, the author the sublime I Can Jump Puddles and How Beautiful are They Feet, and survivor of the polio pandemic, gave me this mammoth hair, sticky-taped on a card, when I was a small child. I've framed it, and it hangs not in a hallway, but on the wall over an oak table. I remember Alan, vaguely: a beautiful elderly man in a wheelchair.



We love what we know, and what we consciously and unconsciously know intimately. We recreate old loves, the goodness and badness inside each of our parents, when we partner with or marry someone. The relationship may be painful, sometimes extremely so, if as children we have not been loved well enough: but it is familiar, and it feels like home. No-one completely escapes their family – we contain inside our psyches one or two people at least, if not Whitman's multitudes. And we love them until it is impossible to love them any longer: until we are patients (sufferers), and in transference-love or the 'real relationship' of psychotherapy, we are loved a little better, and learn to love ourselves more.

I fell in love with Rosa Luxemburg, the Polish socialist intellectual and revolutionary, the first time we 'met' in New York. Training in psychiatry there, I took a course in politics at night to distract myself from the suffering of patients and read a few of her essays, and of her extraordinary life. Born in 1870, the same year as Lenin, she foresaw what Lenin would do (e.g., promote nationalism over internationalism,

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laying the seeds for Stalin) and did her best to stop him.

Luxemburg: blessed with a brilliant, rigorous intellect, she was inspiring, loving, and optimistic. She was brave, tender, and wise. And she could be vicious to her enemies: ice-pick scathing, ruthless. So complex, and towards the end, so clear, and more and more *joyful and loving*.

Excerpts from a letter Luxemburg wrote to her friend, Sophie Liebknecht, in December 1917, while imprisoned for a third year in Bresalu for her pacifism and internationalism. It is a long letter about current political news, grief, encouragement, prison, and the oppression of human beings and animals. The italics & slashes, which make it read like a poem, are mine.

Rosa is all around me as I write this tonight. Two of her books: *Leninism or Marxism?* And *The Russian Revolution*. Biographies. *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*: and scribbled quotes of her thought in pencil on scraps of paper.

Last night this is what I was thinking: how odd it is that I'm constantly in a joyful state of exaltation

I'm lying here in a dark cell on a stone-hard mattress/

from time to time one hears...the distant rumbling of a train/

the entire hopeless wasteland of existence can be heard in this damp, dark night/

I lie there quietly, alone, wrapped in these many-layered black veils of darkness, boredom, lack of freedom, and winter – and at the same time my heart is racing with an incomprehensible joy, unfamiliar inner joy as though I were walking across a flowering meadow in radiant sunshine.

And in the dark I smile at life, as if I knew some sort of magical secret that gives the lie to everything evil and sad and changes it into pure light and happiness. And all the while I'm searching within myself

for some reason for this joy, I find nothing
and must smile to myself again – and laugh at myself.
…
I believe that the secret is nothing but life itself

She was barely over five feet tall and walked with a limp, her hip displaced as a child. *(Did she wrestle with an angel one night, a tendon torn by morning?)* A beautiful voice, sonorous, projecting easily across masses gathered in cobbled squares, and able to fill vast rooms of thousands of men (the Second Internationale meetings, for instance) and swaying them. Some would boo furiously at first: but there was standing and cheering, before she finished -- even she could hardly be heard above the applause and yelling. Trumpeting shouts of hope and cheers for the *possibility of possibility* ***[2]***. Cheering, praising, roars of joy of the justice-to-come. Over and over again, so many speeches. So many newspaper articles and pamphlets. When did she write them all?

She didn't want to fight in politics, never wanted to be a politician or a revolutionary, but politics and revolution came to her. Already fluent in Marx as a teenage girl, already in danger for her political high school speeches, she smuggled herself across the border to Zurich for study - how she loved to learn, this Polish woman who spoke German as her first language: the tongues of sciences (botany and zoology, her first academic loves.) Then: philosophy, history, political science, and her doctorate in economics that is still studied today. She curated and held in her memory poems, novels, and songs. I had a picture somewhere – I'm sure saw it – of her holidaying at a lakeside beach with friends, bicycling there in the summer. She adored her cat, Mimi, labeled botanical specimens, and loved men: Leo Jorgiches was her great love and political partner for many years, and then a dear friend's young son. Marveling and rejoicing in the existence of flowers, she made a garden in a prison yard during one of her many imprisonments, having befriended the superintendent.

Rosa, I say to her, sometimes on wild nights I feel the air is full of frisson, stars are impossibly falling, and the northern and southern lights sheer at once. Rosa: one day I stood in on Broadway on the Upper West Side, and felt something that sounds obscene in language, for it was a state of knowing beyond the reach of words -- that everything, everything was somehow *all right*…it lasted only a few days, and has never returned, but it was a little like in the letter you wrote – a deep peace – *despite and including everything*: the poverty and screaming, the imperfect symmetry of flowers, death, love, war, and history. Life.

Rosa Luxemburg was forty-seven years old when she was murdered on January 15th, 1919, in Berlin, by the Freikorps – mercenaries who had fought in the Great War and were at a loss. They had suffered many losses, in fact: the war, their former selves. They lost morality and empathy (perhaps they were numb, or number than before the war, suffering Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder? Flashbacks, nightmares, attacks of fear and rage?) Many of the members of this paramilitary force went on to be important members of the Nazi party: Himmler, and Rudolph Höss (later the longest 'serving' commandant of Auschwitz.) A group of them dragged Rosa out of hiding in her hotel room that night, where she was reading Goethe, waiting to be found and imprisoned for her political action, as often before: so the long beating would have surprised her. And then the bullet to her brain.

The men with guns threw her into the water of the Landwehr Canal. I imagine her floating

all that morally-blackened, bloody, and freezing night, her long dress a fan around her. But Rosa was not a suicidal Ophelia, maddened by a madder lover, held up by the water and her dress, surrounded by garlands of flowers: she was an assassinated political activist and public intellectual, killed because the government feared she would succeed in bringing forth from her heart and loving mind an irresistible *newness*.

Now I have discovered that the Freikorps weighted her body, so she sank in the canal. Rosa, did you rest on the mud at the bottom? Are you "at rest"? - But you never rested, so why would you now? Busy spirit, the world needs you now more than ever, more than when they killed you.

Thank God we have your books and your letters.

Reading once about her, I found a line like – "Rosa Luxemburg was defeated…" And I had an instant reaction: "Defeated? No! She wasn't defeated, she wasmurdered." Assassination is not the same as defeat. In fact, it's a compliment of sorts – you're really scaring someone with your love for what is right if someone assassinates you, as Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and many other killings would attest. Including: Robert Kennedy, Lincoln, First Nations leaders in Australia and everywhere else, whose names, unforgivably, I don't know.

> Like a door that keeps revolving in a half-forgotten dream –
>
> Or the ripples from a pebble someone tosses in a stream.
>
> Like a clock whose hands are sweeping past the minutes of its face
>
> And the world is like an apple, whirling silently in space.

After a huge political defeat in California, thirty years ago, a small political group was devastated. Tears, disbelief, anger: smoking too many cigarettes, we were all heavy and stony with our grief as bad news came in. Michael, who had fought the hardest, designed most of the campaign, and dreamed its words, was near me. I turned and saw that he was quiet: saddened, but calm.

"How?" I asked. "How can you be so calm?"

"We've only been at this," he said, "- this human rights, this justice thing – we've only been at it for a few thousand years." And then, musingly: "It's going to take a little longer."

Michael Lerner was born in New Jersey in 1941. He was a Professor of Philosophy but lost tenure for his political activities. A leader of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), the Free Speech Movement, and the Anti-war movement, he was one of the 'Seattle Seven' - for that he spent time in prison. He is now a rabbi, and we have long been friends. Today, he is in Berkeley – the city where he fought many battles – and has Covid: he's so unwell he can hardly type. He's written many books, the latest and most cogent of which is *Revolutionary Love: A Political Manifesto*. It's practical and sensible, outlining a way forward.

Love is always revolutionary.

There is love in the letters I keep hidden in a nondescript box at the back of a high shelf, and in the ones I threw away. There are 'love' letters and cards from partners, friends, and people whom I can't quite place anymore.
And then there are those other ones on my bookshelves – the love letters (books) to us all from the world. Both types tell us we could - we must - be together, in Love, or in *beloved community*.

I sobbed for a moment and held back tears when I hid from myself in those boxes. 'Youthful dreams' of changing the world "one person at a time" as my psychoanalyst friend Gail says, but bless her, she's wrong: we have to move faster than that. We need a socialism, or a post-socialism of love.

Do we see now that there were then powers which seemed too big for us, or who persuaded us that we are alone and at war with each other? They are trying hard again, *now*, always, to persuade us this of this lie, and they told and tell us so, again, and again, from every direction, until lies about our separation and competition seemed and seem – utterly real. Reality. Ontologically self-evident, built into the structure of how things are, human nature red in tooth and claw.

No. We are clawing and longing for *revolutionary love*. Just under the skin, we flow with red blood, through the four chambers of our hearts. We are slightly salty rivers, near the ocean's wash when the tide comes in. Feel the pulse at your wrist and in your neck where our best angels kiss us: the beat, *lub-dub, lub-dub*, a timepiece of creaturely eternity in your chest. And the rise of warmth in your wise-animal-body when your heart is moved, and tenderness is near: these are truths, these are the evidence of who we are.

We buried, hid, and tossed into the flames precious jewels-of-longing, lest we seem foolish. Tossed and buried those dreams and loves away, in compliance. But the lonely heart is a hunter, and never completely forgets.

Changing entrenched social structures, changing the belief that this all is natural, is very hard, Lerner says – "but 'very hard' is different from 'impossible'." What a wonderful line.

We are remembering and finding what has been misplaced. A letter, mis-directed, just as some our acts have been, is returned to the right place: delivered. Deliverance.

There is hope: not naïve – strong, clear-eyed, sad, brave, and tender. There is hope in the love letters that are the books, poems, sciences, philosophies, fragments of lines, myths, essays, stories, and songs of experience. They were written long ago, sent in sea-tossed bottles, scrolls, songs – can you hear them? - across oceans, deserts, and wild waves of time. Or they are being written now, and tomorrow.

Circles in spirals can move upwards – upwards! - in ever-widening turns.

There is hope for our hearts, our bodies, each other, the body politic, and the earth: interconnected all. And so we begin, again.

REFERENCES

[1] Donald Winnicott, an English pediatrician and then a most creative, playful, kind and yet serious psychoanalyst meant by this statement that a mother/caregiver and an infant cannot survive alone: they need the holding, the care, of another. And another. And another …

[2] Michael Lerner: one of his definitions of God

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Shame on the U.S. Supreme Court

RABBI MICHAEL LERNER

Ian Hutchinson on Unsplash

Yes, Shame on the U.S. Supreme Court! For the past 40 years, it has been moving bit by bit to dismantle the human rights that previous generations had built into American society. And they won't stop at making abortion harder and harder for women who badly need to have control of their own bodies.

Sadly many on the Left thought that the way to protect those rights was primarily to come up with good arguments to convince the Supreme Court.

Congratulations to the Women's movements in the US which managed to get their message across to at least 69% of the American population that to this day supports some version of abortion rights. Nevertheless, women in many states will have to travel to other states that still make safe abortions possible.

For all of us who support women's right to choose, shame on us that we didn't ask the reason why we lost control of the state legislatures in so many places. We lost supporters at least in part because we never asked the key question: what needs have we failed to adequately address that have led many decent people to move away from a progressive agenda that included women's right to an abortion?

As you may know, Tikkun came into existence after we at the Institute for Labor and Mental Health had completed ten years of studying the psychodynamics of middle-income working people in the US and found that many were moving to the Right not because they agreed with the programs of the Right, but because they felt dissed (disrespected) by the Left. Well, that is a simplistic formulation that does not capture the nuances of what we discovered--for that, you need to read my 2006 national bestseller The Left Hand of God (published by Harper). In that book, I also present a way to communicate a message about abortion that could have created a bridge of understanding between Left and Right on abortion without abandoning the important struggle for legal abortion rights.

RABBI MICHAEL LERNER holds a Ph.D. in philosophy (1972) and a second Ph.D. in psychology (1977), is editor of *Tikkun*, executive director of the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, rabbi of Beyt Tikkun Synagogue-Without-Walls in Berkeley, chair of the international Network of Spiritual Progressives, and author of 12 books, most recently *Revolutionary Love* published by the University of California Press (more info about this book at *www.tikkun.org/lj*).

The Inner Work of Age: An Interview with Rabbi Rami Shapiro

Rabbi Rami Shapiro

CONNIE ZWEIG

[Editor's note: Tikkun draws from the Jewish wisdom of the Torah, Talmud, Jewish mystical tradition, and draws selectively from the Zohar, and Hasidic tradition and from contemporary transformative political movements and brings to them a dimension that secular political movements ought to consider adding to their discourse. Rami Shapiro has much to teach secular activists. --Rabbi Michael Lerner]

IN THE AWARD-WINNING BOOK *The Inner Work of Age: Shifting from Role to Soul,* I extend my work on the Shadow into midlife and beyond and teach aging as a spiritual practice. As an author of several books about the Shadow, the personal unconscious, and as a therapist of thirty years, who teaches shadow-work, I always teach it in conjunction with meditation. And people often ask what one has to do with the other. How does the practice of exploring our unconscious, forbidden feelings and self-sabotaging actions relate to our spiritual lives?

The answer: In late life, if we are to allow into conscious awareness that which we most fear and dread—such as dependency, degeneration, and death—we need to be grounded in something larger than our personality, something beyond ego, which lies within each of us.

The term *pure awareness* refers to a state in which the mind, having gone beyond itself, is silent, open, resting, and simply aware of awareness. We might also call it t*ranscendence, emptiness, sunyata*, or *turiya*, which means pure consciousness in the Hindu tradition. Pure awareness is a portal to silence, which is already always there. Every mystical tradition has a name for it—and a Way to it. It's the universal state of transcendence that the founder of every religion experienced. And it's within each of us—between each thought, between each breath.

Pure awareness is not another object of awareness, like a thought or sensation. It's the subject, the knower of all the objects. Whether we refer to it as emptiness or fullness, as Self or no-Self, it's awareness itself or, as Ram Dass called it, loving awareness.

As we cultivate and dwell in the silence of pure awareness as a regular practice, a dispassionate inner observer, or witness, unfolds. We experience the witness as an objective inner spaciousness, a silent distance from the contents of our minds. When we feel overwhelmed by a shadow character and its loud, repetitive thought pattern, eventually, with the practice of pure awareness, we can simply witness that shadow, while sitting in our silent center.

Linda, a colleague, described it this way: "After

raising three kids and completing a full-time career, I'm so grateful that I have time to just be. I can sit in this impersonal witness awareness, beyond the noise of my mind, and I'm fulfilled. I don't need to try to fix anything anymore. I notice that the peace I exude is my influence on others. It affects everyone around me, and that's enough now."

As we age, we need to cultivate this awareness preventively, not when we're in the midst of a physical or emotional crisis, grasping for solutions. We need to build a life raft now by cultivating a practice that brings us back to our center every day, not when the tidal wave is on the horizon.

Of course, that does not mean that a wave of health crises and losses won't come; it does not mean that our grief will be any easier to bear. But it means that we will have more internal calm from which to relate to the crises that come into our lives. When we learn to silence the noise of the mind and to witness our fleeting thoughts, we can slowly break our identification with these thoughts. We may even glimpse something in us that does not change or age but is timeless.

People ask me, "Why sit still in these chaotic, dangerous times? Shouldn't we be doing more, not closing our eyes? Shouldn't we be paying attention to the news to stay informed? Shouldn't we be marching in the streets?"

As more people grow irritated, outraged, and frightened by the world outside—the climate crisis, uprisings of racism and hate, global pandemics, and rampant misinformation—we need a daily refuge where we can recover and rejuvenate. We need more than ever a way to silence our noisy minds and go beyond our shadowy thoughts, in this way aligning with something deeper than the day's headlines.

But meditation is not only for ourselves. Our inner and outer work are intimately connected. Our sitting practices prepare us to engage in social justice causes and serve the common good with less anger and more compassion, less projection and more sensitivity. Because we're all interconnected, when we act from a silent center, we reduce the chaos and the noise, rather than add to it.

Many people have at least some basic experience with spiritual practices that give us a taste of what lies beyond ordinary, daily awareness. Some of us continue and deepen those practices; others let them go. But the tasks of late-life require the very traits and skills that meditation cultivates: a capacity not only to slow down but to slow downward, manage the mind, release the ego's striving, be fully present, and attune to the voice of the soul.

Today, many of us experience the opposite state: We are drawn outward to the noise, increasingly agitated, angry, and saddened by the chaotic, violent events of our day. We are compelled to look and listen, and the result is that our bodies and minds are overloaded, feeling the disturbance in the Force. So, in this era, more than ever, we need to find a calm center, a refuge from the noise, a way to clear our minds and open our hearts. Over time, we will see the growing impact of turning our attention within.

There are many spiritual traditions, and each has its own exoteric moral/behavioral practices and esoteric inner/mystical practices, with its own method of turning attention inward. Some of us feel drawn to a particular tradition, say Judaism, Advaita, Buddhism, or Christianity. Others sample various traditions and practices through the decades, discovering the gifts and shadow issues of their many teachers and teachings. But the goal of all mystical or contemplative practice is universal: to quiet the mind until it rests in nondual pure awareness.

I spoke about spiritual practice in late life with Rabbi Rami Shapiro, 71, whose eclectic practices stem from mystical Judaism, Zen Buddhism,

and Ramakrishna's Hindu order. He has worked with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Father Thomas Keating. Rami's many books and workshops address the deep unifying experience of non-duality, or unity consciousness, in mystical traditions.

"My body reminds me of my age now," Rami told me. "But the awakening to a singular reality feels ageless," he said. "We can't describe the indescribable, ineffable, infinite aspect, but it has no birth or death. If we experience that, even for a moment, everything changes. We're no longer afraid of death because we know that we are just a wave returning to the ocean. The form is gone, Rami dies, but the oceanic essence remains the same."

I asked him what he practices now, in this decade.

Rami: "Jewish mysticism suggests that we do one practice for each of the five dimensions of life. For the body, I do qigong. For the heart, I do *metta* compassion practice. For the mind, I study sacred texts and write about the links between psychology, religion, and spirituality. For the soul, I practice a mantra connected to the divine mother to become more aware of the interconnection of all things. And for the spirit, I practice self-inquiry from Ramana Maharshi, which involves exploring the many levels of the question Who am I?"

This sounded to me like a full-time job.

Rami: "Whatever we're doing, our lives are always about exploring Who am I? For seekers, it's always a relevant question. Even if they stop meditating for years, the question is there in the shadow. So, just pick it up again."

Even in our later years? I asked.

Rami: "I find that the older I get, the more compelling the question becomes. At sixteen or sixty, ask the question in the same way, and it ripens into the same non-dual reality. Beneath the body of X number of years, the timeless essence remains."

I asked him for some examples from his own experience. He spoke about sitting in a soundproof isolation tank, in zero gravity, when his body/mind disappeared into a nondual state.

Rami: "This Rami, these labels, these aches, and pains, are only the crest on the wave, not our true nature."

Rami dscribed having a similar experience when hesat with an Advaita, or Hindu nonduality, teacher. "I was talking away . . . when he asked, 'Are you?'"

Rami continued: "Everything stopped. Time stopped. Gone. I returned a few minutes later, speechless and free. He had gone behind my mind to just the right question to silence it."

Adapted from *The Inner Work of Age: Shifting from Role to Soul*

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The Power of Peacemaking: Shapeshifting for Justice

JUDITH OLESON

Colin Lloyd on Unsplash

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

- Isaiah 2:4

For far too many weeks, we have watched the horror of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing loss of civilian life, destruction of the environment, and displacement of millions of people. Bombings of schools, hospitals, and suburban neighborhoods unfold continually on CNN, and we feel shocked, angry, incredibly sad, and powerless. President Zelensky has pleaded for Western Powers to protect them from Russian missiles through a no-fly zone. His request, and the entire situation, raises significant questions: Do we fight violence with violence, or demand a ceasefire and the continuation of diplomacy only? How do we, as people of faith, advocate for both peace and justice under such terrible oppressive circumstances?

Isaiah lived in a time of war. Military conflicts were continual between Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires. In chapter 2 verse 4, Isiah describes a future where everyone goes up to the mountain top to experience Yahweh. And in the fullness of this relationship with God, the people turn their weapons into agricultural tools: swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Perhaps most importantly, they commit to training for war no more.

Isaiah's vision of this future must have seem-ed absurd if not impossible at a time when nations or groups continually attacked each other for land, livestock, and power. Many scholars argue this vision is an eschatological one and not realistic behavior for humankind on its own. But today some people are choosing to turn their weapons into garden tools and train for war no more. It may seem absurd, and even unrealistic, to do this in a time of such heightened violence. But if we really know God, we will change our obsession with violence.

It is time for us to wake up and pay attention to Isaiah's vision, or we may lose not only our beloved community and our climate but also our entire world. What might it look like to implement this vision? Shapeshifting is an ancient term that exists in epic poems, folk stories, and children's literature, like Madeline L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time. It is the ability to physically transform oneself or an object into another form by divine intervention. It calls us into both symbolic and concrete forms of conflict transformation.

Art in all cultures both critiques the status quo and expresses prophetic vision. Some artists influenced by their faith have responded to Isiah's vision by literally melting and reforming weapons of our day into garden tools. Their craft brings a sense of urgency to the all-too-acceptable cultural narrative of violence. Disruptive Disciple Blacksmithing is a group in Michigan that is literally turning guns into plowshares and pruning hooks. In another state, Rev. Cory Simon, a Methodist minister, took blacksmithing classes and made his own handgun into a hoe and spade for gardening. He belongs to a group called Raw Tools Network, which is engaged in disarming hearts as well as shapeshifting guns into garden tools. It takes gun donations, turns them into garden tools, and then sells them to support its work in dialogue, nonviolent training, and community garden projects. This is the practice of conflict transformation.

Welling Hall is the Plowshares Professor of Peace Studies, Emerita, at Earlham College and served in that role for 31 years. When she retired, she studied with a metalsmith to learn how to beat swords into plowshares. She collected spent NATO bullet shells and melted them along with ground down combat knives to make a pair of beautiful and functional garden shears.

Photo: Welling Hall

For those of us who are not artists or blacksmiths, what other opportunities are there for shapeshifting? How do we possibly make a dent in this military-industrial complex that reaps outrageous profits from gun sales around the globe, develops advanced nuclear weapons, and subcontracts war activities to private companies? How do we shapeshift the U.S. Pentagon budget into public programs that build and sustain communities, particularly communities that have long suffered inequities and discrimination?

Both the plowshare and the pruning hooks are sharp instruments that cut first in order to enable growth later. The plowshare is the sharp blade at the bottom of the hand plow that cuts into the earth so it can then turn it over, making the soil ready for planting. Pruning hooks cut the branches of the tree to allow for greater fruit production. Thus, both tools are not passive but rather instruments of disruption to enable later growth. In the same way, peacemaking must critique, cut into, and disrupt the business of war-making before peace can prevail. Only then can shapeshifting or conflict transformation occur.

In the past 20 years, the U.S. has invaded Iraq, led a 20-year war in Afghanistan, and participated in Yemen and Syrian wars. The U.S. Global Military Footprint includes over 750 overseas military bases, 200,000 troops over-

seas, and counterterror operations in 85 countries. The U.S. ranks highest in the world in military spending. Our Pentagon budget is three times larger than China's military spending and 10 times greater than Russia's. The U.S. spends more on its military budget than the next 10 countries' biggest spenders combined. In recent years the Pentagon budget was over 750 billion compared to the 9 billion Environmental Protection Agency's budget. (Eliott Negin, It's time to Rein in Inflated Military Budgets, Scientific American, 9/14/2020)

Part of disrupting is to ask who benefits from war? The Cost of War Initiative has documented that half of the U.S. military spending in 2019 was to private contractors, significantly increasing the cost of U.S. military operations. As a result, corporations have a significant lobbying influence on this budget, continually expanding our military-industrial complex. The first step is influencing our legislators to decrease our excessive military budget and shapeshift it into programs for economic and social justice. If we do not speak out, our silence supports the production of weapons of violence and continues to perpetuate poverty and human suffering.

Growing up in the Cold War we were taught to hate and fear the Russians. We practiced drills in elementary school where we hid under our desks to be safe if the Russians dropped an atomic bomb on us. None of us understood that our method of defense, a small wooden desk, would not hold up against a nuclear bomb. We just did as we were told. Since then, there have been some bright moments among people of faith and humanitarians disrupting this narrative. In 1946, Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi stated: "I regard the employment of the atom bomb for the wholesale destruction of men, women, and children as the most diabolical use of science." In 1947, Gandhi claimed, "he who invented the atom bomb has committed the gravest sin in the world of science," and, "The only weapon that can save the world is non-violence."

Jewish physicist Joseph Rotblat, a refugee to the US during the Holocaust, reluctantly agreed to work in the Manhattan Project in order to develop an atom bomb before the Germans. When he learned that the Germans abandoned their atomic research, he resigned, becoming the only conscientious objector of the Manhattan Project. He spent the rest of his life working on complete nuclear disarmament, and he was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts. In 1961 Women Strike for Peace organized marches across the country to demonstrate against nuclear weapons. Their slogan was, "End the Arms Race: Not the Human Race." The Nuclear Freeze movement around the globe in the 70s and 80s was successful influencing many governments to reduce their nuclear arsenals. As a result of this movement, in 1987 Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty that proposed to eliminate all intermediate and short-range ground-based missiles and launchers from Europe. And it almost happened!

In 2005 over two hundred people, of all faiths were arrested during a prayerful vigil at the Nevada nuclear test site, in observance of the 60th anniversary of the US bombing of Hiroshima. Executive Director of Pax Christi USA, Dave Robinson, said was an opportunity to bring together people of faith with varied strengths. He said the story of the nuclear age was "one missed opportunity after another." Only within the specter of mutually assured destruction, he claimed, has "our society found peace -- a twisted version of shalom." It was also at this gathering that Rabbi Arthur Waskow led prayers, called for the end of nuclear weapons, and was arrested. In 1983 he founded the Shalom Center in Philadelphia, initially to

address the threat of nuclear weapons through a Jewish lens.

In his Statement on the 75th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, August 6, 2020, The Dalai Lama wrote, "When conflicts arise, they should be settled through dialogue, not the use of force. We need to eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons, with the ultimate aim of a demilitarized world … War means killing. Violence leads to counter violence. We need to put an end to combat and the production of weapons and construct a more peaceful world."

Other than these memorial services, most communities of faith have been silent on nuclear arms, pretending that an increasing arsenal of weapons are not a threat and are essential to deter war. We just do as we are told. We are still hiding under those wooden desks. Scientists believe that right now we are more at risk of nuclear war than ever. Citizens of Europe are very afraid. So afraid that they are emptying pharmacies of iodine tablets in case of nuclear fallout from the war in Ukraine.

But we are not without hope. Sister Carol Gilbert and Sister Ardeth Platte spent many years educating, organizing, and engaging in acts of nonviolence at the Pentagon and at many nuclear war sites throughout the U.S. Between the two of them they spent 15 years in jail because of their civil disobedience, Thanks to their disruption, along with that of many others, enough countries signed the UN Treaty Prohibiting Nuclear Weapons in January 2021 to ban these weapons on a global level. There is still work to be done on ratification, compliance, and urging the U.S. and other nations to sign on. The funding of these highly expensive and dangerous weapons can be shapeshifted into plowshares and pruning hooks. This is the work of conflict transformation.

Dr. Martin Luther King, throughout his ministry critiqued the military expansion, particularly nuclear weapons, indicating that nonviolent action had to include disarmament. When asked about the use of nuclear weapons in 1957, he responded, "I definitely feel that the development and use of nuclear weapons should be banned … The principal objective of all nations must be the total abolition of war. War must be finally eliminated or the whole of mankind will be plunged into the abyss of annihilation." In a speech in 1959 to the War Resisters League, Dr. King questioned, "What will be the ultimate value of having established social justice where all people, (Negro and White) are merely free to face destruction by strontium 90 or atomic war?" In an article, "Pilgrimage to Non-Violence," King stated, "The church cannot remain silent while mankind faces the threat of being plunged into the abyss of nuclear annihilation. If the church is true to its mission, it must call for an end to the arms race."

Author James Baldwin, a key speaker at a disarmament conference in the '60s, was asked why he was there. In response, he said, "Only those who would fail to see the relationship between the fight for civil rights and the struggle for world peace would be surprised to see me here. Both fights are the same … Racial hatred and the atom bomb both threaten the destruction of mankind as created free by God." In his book African Americans Against the Bomb, Vincent Intondi documents how Blacks in the U.S. saw the use of atomic bombs as a racial issue, claiming that huge levels of public funding were used to build nuclear arms instead of improving impoverished communities. He also made the connection between arms production and the colonialism of Africans, citing the U.S. extraction of uranium in Belgian-controlled Congo.

Thich Nhat Hanh gave a series of talks to peace workers at Buddhist centers in 1985, that were

published later in his book, Being Peace. He taught, "Meditation is to see deeply into things, to see how we can change, how we can transform our situation. To transform our situation is also to transform our minds. To transform our minds is also to transform our situation, because the situation is mind, and mind is situation. Awakening is important. The nature of the bombs, the nature of injustice, the nature of the weapons, and the nature of our own beings are the same. This is the real meaning of engaged Buddhism."

Peoples of all faiths are in a unique position to come down from our mountain top experience with God (Isiah 2: 2-3) and shapeshift our weapons of war into tools for diplomacy, human welfare, and Common Security. It is essential to cut into the cultural narrative of war and transform conflict with tools of equity, justice, and peace. This means shapeshifting our public policy from weapons of violence to tools of justice. This is the way we transform conflict and begin to move towards Isaiah's vision.

To some, this may be an untimely or unrealistic message as we watch Russia bomb city after city in Ukraine, killing citizens and causing millions to flee from their homes. It is understandable that Ukrainians want to defend themselves and their country. They are proud people who want to be independent, with a commitment to peaceful co-existence with Russia. Their context is historically very complex, with internal conflict around allegiances to both Europe and Russia and the role of NATO in the region. But this war cannot be used to justify a permanent increase to the already-inflated military budget of the U.S. at the expense of its own citizens. (See William Hartung, Responsible Statecraft). Non-violent responses like sanctions, protests, economic boycotts, and continued diplomacy are the answer, not the escalation of war. And the U.S. and its allies are pursuing all of these. Even Russian citizens are protesting at great risk: the woman on the Russian State TV show who walked behind the news anchor with an anti-war poster, and the courage of 20,000-plus Russians that have been arrested for demonstrating against this war, possibly facing 15 years in confinement. And then there are the Ukrainian mothers who have set up a hotline for Russian mothers to call for information about their sons fighting in the war and provide accurate information about what is going on in Ukraine. Mother-to mother-diplomacy. Shapeshifting violence even within war zones.

Twelve years ago, I was in Kyiv visiting Ukrainian friends who were building their fragile yet growing democracy. It was soon after the Orange Revolution. They were shapeshifting a history of oppression and corruption into a new society. One scene remains fixed in my heart and mind. It was March 8th, International Women's Day, and all the men in the street were coming home from work with flowers in their arms for their mothers, partners, or sisters. It was snowing, the soft end of the day, and the golden light illuminated the red and yellow flowers everywhere in the streets. It was beautiful and peaceful. Today I think of those men carrying weapons instead of flowers, and the women trudging in the cold with their children to cross the borders. But I also am moved to tears by unarmed Ukrainians standing in front of Russian tanks to block their advances into their towns, Ukrainian grandmothers yelling at armed Russian soldiers to go home, and even some Russian soldiers refusing to kill Ukrainians. Against all odds, these are examples of shapeshifting tools of violence into nonviolent tools for peace.

It is now up to those of us who have been to the mountain to put away our complacency and disrupt our oversized military budget through art, nonviolent protest, and influencing public policy. Turning swords into plow-

shares and spears into pruning hooks requires a disruption of our military-industrial complex so we train for war no more, or at least a lot less. It envisions a collective effort to abolish all nuclear weapons. At this moment, at this time, we cannot say we speak for racial and economic justice without engaging in Isaiah's vision of shapeshifting tools of violence into tools that disrupt. Only then will we support our communities in producing all that brings forth life.

(This article is adapted from a sermon given by Judith Oleson, Boston University School of Theology, Marsh Chapel, March 16, 2022)

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The Torah of Being Here Now: Ram Dass' Understanding of Judaism as a Spiritual Path

JONAH GELFAND

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In 1967 a Jewish psychologist-turned-psychonaut named Richard Alpert reluctantly followed an acquaintance into an ashram in the Himalayan foothills. At this small roadside shrine, he met a Hindu guru named Neem Karoli Baba Maharaj-ji and the direction of his life changed forever. A few months later, he was sent back to the United States with the name Ram Dass, or servant of God. Clad in flowing robes and beads, Ram Dass quickly became a leader of the New Age movement, publishing his classic *Be Here Now* in 1971 and inspiring thousands to embark on spiritual quests. Although raised Jewish, he spent most of his career teaching an amalgamation of Hindu, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions.

But there was a shift in 1992 when Ram Dass was invited to speak at the University of Judaism on the topic of "Judaism and Spirituality." This offer gave him cause to plunge into the sources of his heritage seriously for the first time and the resulting lecture provided exclusive insight into not only why he did not turn to Judaism originally but also how his non-Jewish spiritual experiences helped him reframe Judaism as a potent spiritual path.

To understand this history, we must look at Ram Dass' five decades of teaching, which can be divided into two distinct eras. Originally his teachings centered on divesting from corporeality and dissolving into the One through meditation, chant, and guru worship. This began to shift around 1975— marking the start of a constant wrestling with what it means to be an incarnated being with all its cultural trappings. This reframing also marks his first reconsiderations of Judaism. In turning his attention back to the Jewish canon, the tradition that spoke most to his mystical sensibilities, was the East-

ern European mystical revival movement of Hasidism. More particularly, it was its romanticized presentation by neo-Hasidic writers such as Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Like his transmission of Eastern spirituality to the West, this "neo-Hasidism" attempts to make the material accessible to those outside its cultural context and was therefore an easy entry point for Ram Dass. The union of his previously held spirituality with this neo-Hasidic influence resulted in a unique understanding of Judaism as a spiritual path of "awakening" that systematizes "being here now." Since he only spoke about this union at length during this single lecture at the University of Judaism, and this lecture was only first made accessible online in late 2021, we are now afforded a never-before-heard window into Ram Dass' relationship to Judaism. (You can watch the full lecture at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXJy00v4J8Y.)

ASSIMILATION

To fully understand his spirituality, we first need to understand how Ram Dass thought about Judaism growing up. Almost every quote of Ram Dass referencing Judaism in the first few decades of teaching fits into two categories. First, his understanding of Judaism as essentially a religion of regulating behavior but lacking mystical experience. And second, Jewishness as merely a political identity that breeds anxiety-ridden high-achievers. For example, in the introduction to his classic *Be Here Now*, he writes that "Until you know a good middleclass Jew, upwardly mobile, anxiety-ridden, and neurotic, you haven't met a real achiever!" Similarly, if you look up "Judaism" on Ramdass.org, the only thing that comes up is an excerpt from a lecture he gave in 1973 in which he stated that "Judaism [is]… designed for people who in one lifetime are not going to begin to awaken… it's designed to keep them cool. To keep them moral and cool and together… the Jews aren't primarily interested in what happened to Moses up in the Mountain – their primary interest is what he brought back."

In the first hour of his "Judaism and Spirituality" lecture, he explains at length that he was taught Judaism as a mere "social-communal-political" influence. He describes the assimilation of the 20th century as "a time when Jews were becoming Americans by learning how to be ashamed of their parents. And their parents were conspiring in it for their children." He goes on to ask, "Can you feel the pain of all that?"

Ram Dass' grandparents emigrated from Eastern Europe and Russia at the turn of twentieth century. After their deaths, his father supported the family, attending law school during the day and playing violin at night. Eventually, his father was lucky enough to infiltrate the "yankees" who ran the upper-class law scene in Boston and rose swiftly through their ranks. He made enough money to move to the suburbs, transition into the business sector, and eventually became the president of the New Haven railroad. The success of the Alperts was exemplary, to say the least.

And yet, with this upward socioeconomic mobility came the shedding of religiosity. "During the time of my growing up," Ram Dass explains, "we started out as Orthodox and became liberal Conservative, I would say… The pain for my father and mother was that they went through that transition. I never knew the other end. They went through knowing what the laws

were and then choosing not to follow them." By the time he was growing up, "nobody care[d] that I be religious, they just cared that I be a Jew." Young Richard Alpert became a Bar Mitzvah and was confirmed, but the primary pressure placed on him was directed at his becoming "successful," which he eventually achieved in the form of professorship at Harvard. Ironically, it was here that he was first exposed to psylocibin by his collogue Timothy Leary, and both were forced out of Harvard, and subsequently crowned counter-culture icons.

As his spiritual career went on, one can find more evidence of Ram Dass intentionally engaging with Judaism, such as his long-term friendship with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and his participation in panels with Jews that similarly excelled as teachers of other spiritual traditions. And yet even in these contexts, he often joked about only being Jewish "on his parent's side" and usually represented a non-Jewish voice. Insidiously, much of this humorous sentiment contained within it kernels of internalized antisemitism that Ram Dass would have to struggle with for the rest of his life.

But what was so wrong with Judaism that Ram Dass and his co-panelists traveled across the world to find viable alternatives?

CRISIS OF GOD IN JUDAISM

It was his experiences with psychedelics that first made Ram Dass interested in spirituality at all. He explains that he was looking for "maps" of the expanded consciousness that he experienced on these chemicals. "At that point," he explains, "had I been in a warm relationship with Judaism, it may well have been that I would have found—through the Kabbalah, the Zohar, the Book of Brilliance—the maps that would have given me some structure to what I had experienced. But I didn't have that entree. And the result was that we were given by Aldous [Huxley] the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which had a whole structure about what I had experienced." As he tried to find answers to consciousness— first through chemicals and then from his guru— Judaism just became nothing more than corporeal baggage to transcend.

One story that became a persistent example in his lectures for the lackluster spirituality of Judaism was a conversation he had with a rabbi upon returning from India and attending his mother's unveiling: "I'm in robes and the rabbi is there with his sunglasses and his soft hat and we do the service. And then he comes up and grabs me by the elbow— as rabbis are wont to do at times— and he says, "what have you been up to?" Whether he was there to save me, or his curiosity got the better of him, I don't know… So, I said, "do you really wanna know?" He said "yes." And so... we leaned against two tombstones, and I proceeded to tell him about all these miraculous things that happened to me in India with my spiritual teacher. And as he listened, I saw his face soften and then he said to me, "You know, when I was studying for my finals, I took too much NoDoz and I was reading the Bible and suddenly it fell away and I was on the Sinai desert and it was all happening to me." For a Jew to experience that truth of "we are all in Egypt! We are escaping from Egypt!" And he was lit up. And I said, "what a wonderful, wonderful experience. I bet you have given a lot of sustenance to the congregation through that story." And he looked at me strangely and he said, "You know, until now I have never told it to anyone but my wife." He said "Judaism is a folk religion and I'm an interpreter of the law. Why don't we join the rest of the group?"

This disconnect is representative of a larger problem in Judaism that continues to push many seekers to other traditions: "Judaism's

deepest crisis concerns God," argues scholar Alon Goshen-Gottstein in his book *The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism: History, Spirituality, Identity*. "Judaism is a religion that centers around God," he goes on. "But that has lost touch, to a large extent, with… the awareness of God at its center and the ability to structure the entire life of the religious community around access to the divine presence and its grounding in the community's life."

Ram Dass' experience clearly confirms this assessment, and Goshen-Gottstein shows that most Jews identify the pull of other traditions as one of searching for the spirituality that they deem missing in their own. "Although there are certainly exceptions to the rule," Ram Dass explains, "the Judaism that's available to most people in this society has treated the Kabbalah, or the esoteric Judaism, as available only to a few. And it has not been widely available in a living spiritual transmission. And so many of us went to other systems." Neo-Hasidic leader Arthur Green has shown in his book *Judaism for the World: Reflections on God, Life*, and Love that inherent to this "mainstream Judaism" that Ram Dass speaks of was the exclusion of "the mystical tradition, along with anything else that seemed like an embarrassment to a Jewry that sought to have its faith accepted as liberal and rational."

And while Ram Dass' fame grew, his negative association with Judaism grew with it as he was simultaneously blamed for dwindling Jewish engagement and became a target for Orthodox outreach to "return to the fold." Yet as he evolved in his Eastern spiritual practice, he realized that the details of his incarnation could not be a mistake, and thus he must ultimately contend with his Judaism.

TAKING THE CURRICULUM

The path taught to Ram Dass in India was what he called "a renunciant path." In this tradition, "the stress was on getting free [from] being bound to the earth in order to be back in the light with God." Despite this training, he explains in another lecture that starting in 1975, "I began to see that I was missing a boat about honoring what a human incarnation was about… I was throwing out the baby with the bath." This realization arose after one of his teachers chided him by saying, "you humans are so stuck in your dualistic mind… you came to the earth to come to school and why don't you take your curriculum instead of trying to skip school all the time." Repainting "transcendence" as "skipping school" forced Ram Dass to come face to face with that which he would rather meditate away from, such as his queerness, his Americanness, and his Jewishness. (For more on Ram Dass' struggles with Judaism and queerness, see https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/ram-dass-the-jew/.)

After this, Ram Dass "realized that there was function in my humanity and function in the experiences that were being presented to me. And I had to, as the Buddha said, 'honor the preciousness of my human birth.'"

Although he explained it through Buddhism, this reframe was, in fact, his first turn back to Jewish traditional values. Unlike a renunciant path, the focus on worldly action is integral to Judaism—and especially to Hasidism. Since God is understood not to be a distant transcendent deity, but an immanent Divinity manifested in all things in the world, many Hasidic rabbis push against the urge to transcend beyond corporeality. Instead, they teach *avodah b'gashmiut* or "worship in physicality." Rather than using meditations to enter alternate states of consciousness, Hasidism teaches that this awakening is done through a reframing of the corporeal world. It is precisely through engaging with the material world that the Divinity brimming within it can be uplifted to Holiness.

Unlike the mere social identifier of his youth, in this Judaism Ram Dass found a tradition that "take[s] every part of your life: how you go to the toilet, how you make love, how you keep bills, how you make money, how you deal with your neighbors. All of it. [And says:] We've got a rule that covers it." And yet this 1992 lecture at the University of Judaism is the only place where he unpacked this further by laying out his understanding of Judaism as a spiritual path.

JUDAISM AS A SPIRITUAL PATH

In preparation for this lecture, Ram Dass did a deep dive into the Jewish canon. As a mystic, we have already seen that he was most drawn to the Hasidic and neo-Hasidic traditions, wherein he recognized similar devotional modes to those he found in India. To unpack this theology more fully, we must look at a few specific topics.

HOLY BEINGS: Ram Dass' teachings have always centered around the reality that there are enlightened beings: people who have used spiritual practices to tap into God consciousness and live an awakened existence. This is not necessarily an empirical reality but one that is proven through his experience with his guru, Neem Karoli Baba Marahaj-ji, and his years of spiritual practice. It is thus not surprising that central to his understanding of Hasidism was his assertion that in Maharaj-ji, he had met "a being who was very much like what we would call a *tzaddik*," or a Hasidic leader. When he began reading stories of these Jewish holy beings, he recognized in their student's descriptions the same reverence he held for his teacher and was therefore drawn in. "In any tradition," he once said, "a mensch is a mensch."

In addition to his classic repertoire of Eastern monk stories, in his lecture at the University of Judaism he adds stories of the Hasidic rebbes. He even sometimes references Hasidic tales without specifically citing them, showing his familiarity with the tales. For example, in response to a question about finding a teacher, he said, "Obviously, if you can be around a tzaddik, jump at it. Grab it. Hang onto the feet. Watch him tie his shoelaces. The whole *shtick*." Here he mixes the classic Hasidic tale of a devotee going to the rebbe not to learn Torah but to watch him ties his shoes with the Hindu practice of touching a saint's feet. This shows how familiar these sources felt to Ram Dass when read through the lens of guru worship.

JEWISH PRACTICE: "For the Jewish path," Ram Dass explains, "…your incarnation is your curriculum. Your life is your path. It's the playing-field. It is life focused. 'Choose life.' [Deut. 30:19]" He goes on to present the intricacies of Jewish law, or halakhah— with all its minutiae— as a systematized way for a community to "be here now" with the "the Oneness of all things." When he describes Jewish law as "a way as to allow you to remember from moment to moment the divine nature of manifestation," he is still speaking from mainstream Judaism, but once he starts invoking such ideas as God being concealed in "the dazzling hiddenness" of the world and "what we are in the system are just sparks of Divine that have been exiled from the totality and are somehow on the way back," he is speaking from the influence of Hasidic and Kabbalistic thought that is central to his mysticism.

This influence becomes even clearer when he speaks of the pitfalls of a legal, obligatory spirituality. "The tricky thing about it," he explains, "is that if you lose the spiritual connection, those rules can become harsh law." He cites this harshness as a reason for his original hesitancy towards Judaism but goes on to explain that he now sees within Orthodox Judaism— and Hasidism particularly— a "regularize[d] mystical experience" wherein there is "direct

experience that is balanced with the imposition of the structure."

He calls this "an exquisite practice for awakening" and quotes the Baal Shem Tov, famed founder of Hasidism, who said, "Reality is a series of meetings, each of which demands of the person what can be fulfilled by that person, just by that person, and just in this hour." Unpacking it in a very Ram Dassian way, he continues "The Baal Shem Tov is saying 'it's perfect. You're doing fine. You are the absolute perfect neurotic underachiever at this moment.' It's not some terrible error. Most people go around life thinking they are in some terrible error.
If I was only standing here, I would be free.
The secret of Judaism is standing where you're standing and being free." Thus the minutiae of Jewish law transform into self-affirming ways to become free through mindfully being in the moment.

SHABBAT AND STUDY: Of the 613 commandments in Jewish law, the two that stood out most for Ram Dass were those around Shabbat and the importance of study. For the meditation-minded, Shabbat shines forth as the definite pearl of all Jewish tradition. "True you will live in time on this plane," Ram Dass comments, "but they play with time such that every seventh day, you will enter into eternity." He goes on: "I mean if you can hear a more dazzling game! What its saying is that for six days you get caught and hung up in all the traps of power, sex, all the stuff. You're working with it by kissing the mezuzah and doing everything you can, but you're probably going under anyway. Even if you're doing all 613 of the halakhic rules, it can all become rote, too. Which is the horror of a lot of it. But you're doing it.... but then comes the Sabbath, the whole game changes."

Just as setting aside time for spiritual work was already part of Ram Dass' practice, so was the importance of study. He invokes the image of the Talmudic scholars poring over texts in ferocious debates as an exemplary spiritual path. "What it's saying," he argues "is 'this is the word of God. If you keep studying it and studying and studying it, you get into deeper and deeper understandings of it and the process of studying it will transform your life.'" Of course, these two commandments are most possible when done within a community that supports the practice.

COMMUNITY: Ram Dass' conception of community starts with reformulating Judaism's "chosen people" idea in the context of Eastern "priest class" discourse. In those cultures, there are a few individuals set apart from the laypeople who are held to a higher standard. "But for the Israelites," he explains, "it was defined—to my understanding— that the entire population was the priest class and therefore everybody was expected to realize, in their own lives, the covenant that God had entered into with the Israelites through Moses. In fact, in Judaism the experience is that you– as I said earlier— you personally were there! You are part of that lineage, you are part of that covenant that was entered into, and that covenant is very much like a marriage. And it's an interesting marriage. It says God and the individual will be partners in making the world just. And in bringing love and the spirit to the world."

This communal sentiment is clearly very impactful for Ram Dass, who marvels that on the Day of Atonement the reading of sins is said as collectively, regardless of whether you committed those sins in the past year. "In other words," he says, "you're taking everyone's sins. We're all in it together."

That the Jewish people are understood as one coherent body seems to be a relief for Ram Dass, who openly struggles with being seen as a traitor to the community. "I read articles in which it says I have led more people away from Judaism than anybody else," he laments. "It was

not, certainly, an intention to lead people away from Judaism. It was responding to the truth of my own heart. And I just don't have too much choice in that matter." And yet, in this lecture we have seen him wonder how his life would have differed had he been in a "warm relationship" with Judaism at the time of his spiritual awakening.

Although he admits that he does not plan on returning to practicing Judaism, he says that through the process of preparing for this lecture, he started "returning to my heart being open in the presence of Judaism. To loving it." This can be felt in the opening of this lecture, where he beautifully introduces himself not s Ram Dass, but instead as Reuven ben Chaim Yoseph.

CONCLUSION

Shortly before this lecture, Ram Dass bought a *mezuzah*. "So, I'll start. I'll kiss the mezuzah every time I go out the door." he explains. "That happened twice… pretty soon I was so busy going somewhere, I forgot the mezuzah. The minute I realized that, I took a string and hung it over the door. It hung down so it hit my forehead when I walked out… which reminded me the mezuzah was there, which led to me to turn and kiss it. Because you gotta retrain yourself, it takes a while."

This anecdote perfectly encapsulates Ram Dass' relationship with all of Judaism. It is one of give and take; of acknowledging the perfect imperfections of your birth and working with them despite the discomfort. Engaging with it was unnatural at first, but he recognized an inherent spiritual value in the practice and that—as an incarnated being born into a Jewish family—it is beautifully required of him to participate in some capacity. It was part of his curriculum.

At this 1992 "Judaism and Spirituality" lecture, Ram Dass was introduced by Rabbi Shlomo Schwartz. In his remarks, Schwartz tells of first meeting Ram Dass and presenting him with a button that said, "Nice Jewish Boy." He expected him to accept the pin and graciously place it in his pocket. But to his surprise, Ram Dass proudly put it on.

NOTE:

I would like to thank Rabbi Zac Kamenetz for posting the Ram Dass lecture at the University of Judaism online and for a long conversation on a walk that sparked the idea for this article.

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Wounded Healing

DIANE JOY SCHMIDT

I MADE ARRANGEMENTS TO WATCH A NEW FILM about the Holocaust that sounded interesting, *Three Minutes—A Lengthening*. But then, it operated on me like a surgical procedure: it brought unconscious deep fears to the surface that I didn't even know I had. It upset me so much that two baby bull snakes and two gigantic Wolf spiders came into the house that night, as if my fear had reverberated down to awaken them in their nests and touch their webs, summoning them up from the depths to come for a visit.

So then I didn't think I could write about that film and decided instead to view *Hallelujah: Leonard Cohen, A Journey, A Song*. Currently in limited release in theaters, it will be available for sale on DVD on Oct. 11th.

This film *Hallelujah* reconnected me to myself. It acted like a key that opened new doors of creativity. But somehow first I had to be broken.

The painful film that I didn't want to write about, *Three Minutes*, brings an awareness of the Holocaust without ever actually showing what happened—the film footage was shot just on the edge of what was about to happen.

In 1938 Kodak came out with an amateur version of their 16-millimeter Cine Kodak film camera. Spring-loaded, you popped in a cassette, black and white or color, cranked it up, and it would run for a few minutes. That year, David Kurtz, who had left Poland in the 1890's, having done well in America, decided to make a grand tour of Europe, and on a side trip, revisited his ancestral village of Nasielsk. He shot 3 minutes of film there.

His grandson Glenn Kurtz went on a hunt for the film 70 years later, and found it, moldering away in his parents' closet, in 2008, just Cohen,

before it would be lost forever. The old film's base was dissolving, but because someone

had transferred part of it onto VHS tape in the 1980's, he could see what it was. He sent it to be restored by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and published a book about its significance, *Three Minutes in Poland: Discovering a Lost World in a 1938 Family Film*, published byFarrar, Strauss and Giroux in 2014, and heralded as one of the best books of the year by the New Yorker and others. This year, Dutch filmmaker Bianca Stigter, together with her British producer husband Steve McQueen (*12 Years a Slave*), released a documentary film based on Kurtz's book to international acclaim. The film has a curious intensity—it contains no talking heads, just a deep examination of the moments in the footage and each of the faces it documented, narrated by a woman's voice.

In August of 1938, crowds of happy children mugged for the novel movie camera. They excitedly ran down the street to remain in its eye as the man panned along the houses. Never in their wildest nightmares did they dream of what was to come. In September 1939, Germany swept over Poland and took away and killed almost all the Jewish people living there, the children, the mothers and fathers, in every little town and village. The entire Jewish population of Nasielsk was rounded up, held in the synagogue for three days, and then taken away and deported, mostly to Treblinka.

As I watched this film in a sunny late summer afternoon, I spotted a young girl who stood front and center for the camera in a crowd. I recognized myself, my features, in hers. In that way, in that moment I connected with the reality of what had happened. I was swept into the horror of what was to come, thrown into a time machine eight decades back.

Later, I had a feeling—I looked on a map. The town, Nasielsk, Poland, where David Kurtz was born in about 1880, was 35 miles northeast of Warsaw. Another 35 miles northeast from there, practically the next town over, Raciaz, is where my grandmother was born in the early 1880's. She left Poland with my great-grandparents when she was five. My mother remembered her writing letters in Yiddish for my great-grandmother to a relative back in Poland. After 1939 they heard nothing.

A girl flips her bobbed hair back and forth, sitting at a window looking out. The film replays this. Then, a blurred screen. A voice narrates what happened then in Nasielsk when the Germans came.

The record of what happened was because Emanuel Ringelblum, a Jewish historian, organized teams in the Warsaw ghetto who wrote down eye-witness testimonies from Jews as they streamed in from the countryside. These oral histories were buried in boxes and three large milk cans in the cellars of buildings. They also contained the only eye-witness account, by an escapee from the death camp of Chelmno in 1942, about the mass extermination in gas vans, which was smuggled out that year to England. Ringelblum and his family later escaped, but were captured and shot in 1944. After the war, boxes and two of the milk cans were found.

Eventually, Kurtz would locate 7 survivors from Nasielsk. They had been children in the film. Today, viewers feel a sense of immediacy, that presence that home movies capture. One survivor said that viewing the film gave him back his childhood. The narrator suggests that for the survivors, the images we are watching are just a token of a whole world they had lost.

HALLELUJAH

The documentary film, "Hallelujah: Leonard A Journey, A Song," directed by Dan Geller and Dayna Goldfine, traces the evolution of his most famous song, "Hallelujah," through focusing on Cohen as a seeker, a spiritual searcher.

At one level, the essence of Judaism is in asking questions.

Watching this film I found myself mysteriously reconnecting to a part of myself that also had been buried a long time. The patina of life's mundanity was replaced with the deep chords of the soul's search. After seeing it, I felt good in my heart. And that night, attending a life-drawing class, I drew like I never had been able to draw before— the strokes emanated from inside of me, sweeping through my arm into my fist that held a bit of charcoal against the paper.

Judaism teaches about the paradoxical nature of things - the ineffable, the unknowable, the name of God that cannot be named - and yet, here we are, commanded to sing His praises. And still yet, "Hallelujah" sets you up to go one way, then throws you another. In that very experience, Cohen gives a taste of that paradoxical, contradictory, nature of things. The song begins:

> I've heard there was a secret chord
> that David played to please the Lord
> but you don't really care for music, do you?
> It goes like this: the fourth, the fifth
> the minor fall, the major lift;
> the baffled king composing "Hallelujah."

About songwriting, Cohen is shown saying, "It is, it is a gift—of course you have to keep your tools, keep your skill in a condition of operation but the real song, where that comes from, no one knows, that is grace, that is a gift, and that is, that is not yours. If I knew where songs came from I would go there more often."

The film then cuts to his rabbi, Rabbi Finley, who says, "There's something called the Bat Kol, which in the Torah is the feminine voice of God that extends into people. The Bat Kol arrives. And if you're in her service, you write down what she says. And then she goes away. So the baffled king is 'I just wrote this secret chord, I don't know how I got it, but what I think I did is, I made myself open to the Bat Kol.'"

It took Cohen four years or more to write "Hallelujah," and he reportedly wrote somewhere between 80 and 180 verses. At one point he found himself banging his head on the floor of his hotel room, despairing of ever finishing it.

Finally, he selected four verses, with the refrain Hallelujah repeated four times between each verse, and recorded it in 1985 on the album Various Positions. It then came as a great shock when the new head of Columbia Records rejected the album and refused to release it.

The film follows the song's slow torturous rise from this obscurity—Bob Dylan recognized its brilliance and would sing verses of it in concert; John Cale, of Velvet Underground fame, asked Cohen to share more of the verses with him, which he performed in a solo concert in 1991. Then, in 1994, Jeff Buckley recorded it on his album "Grace," the version that ultimately brought "Hallelujah" into national prominence.

Cohen was a spiritual seeker, but he was also tormented by terrible depressions, which he treated by drinking too much. He retreated to a Zen monastery outside Los Angeles for five years, but apparently, he and the Roshi would drink whiskey at night together there, so it was only later when he went to India and learned another form of meditation there that he finally found respite.

Cohen draws holiness into the world, into the act of love. And this unusual and rare humanity is what draws people to him, to this song, as a safe harbor, a place where we can find ourselves, in our own struggles. He reveals his struggle as an artist—to despair, to fail, to persevere, to keep going. A later verse goes like this:

> Now maybe there's a God above
> But all I ever learned from love

is how to shoot at someone who outdrew you.
And it's no complaint you hear tonight,
and it's not some pilgrim who's seen the light
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah.

Cohen rarely explained his work. He shared this: "You look around and you see a world that is impenetrable; that cannot be made sense of. You either raise your fists, or you say 'Hallelujah.' I try to do both."

After seeing the film there were certain things I wanted to learn about Leonard Cohen's heritage: He was born in Montreal on September 21, 1934. His paternal grandfather came from the city of Suwalki in northeastern Poland in the 1870s; his mother was born in Lithuania. His family was very successful in the clothing business in Montreal. They liked to wear suits.

Here are some other things I learned along the way: Cohen's parents gave him the Hebrew name Eliezer, meaning, God helps. He was brought up Orthodox, and with the idea that he was a direct descendant of Aaron, the first High Priest. At times throughout his life, he saw himself as a messianic figure, infusing spirituality in the masses. The film shows footage of his concert in Tel Aviv on September 29, 2009, when he gave the Priestly Blessing to the thousands gathered at Ramat Gan Stadium.

I wondered if he ever performed in Poland. He did. He performed in Poland, in 1985. Everyone there wanted him to say something about Solidarity founder Lech Walesa and the political turmoil going on at that time. Before singing *Who by Fire*, he said to the audience, "When I was a child and I went to synagogue every Saturday morning... And once, in this country, there were thousands of synagogues and thousands of Jewish communities which were wiped out in a few months. In the synagogue which I attended there was a prayer for the government.[...] I sing for everyone. My song has no flag, my song has no party. And I say the prayer, that we said in our synagogue, I say it for the leader of your union and the leader of your party. 'May the Lord put a spirit, a wisdom and understanding into the hearts of your leaders and into the hearts of all their councilors.'"

I think this approach is helpful. It is forward-looking. It reflects Jewish values. To pray that all will be spiritually guided by wisdom.

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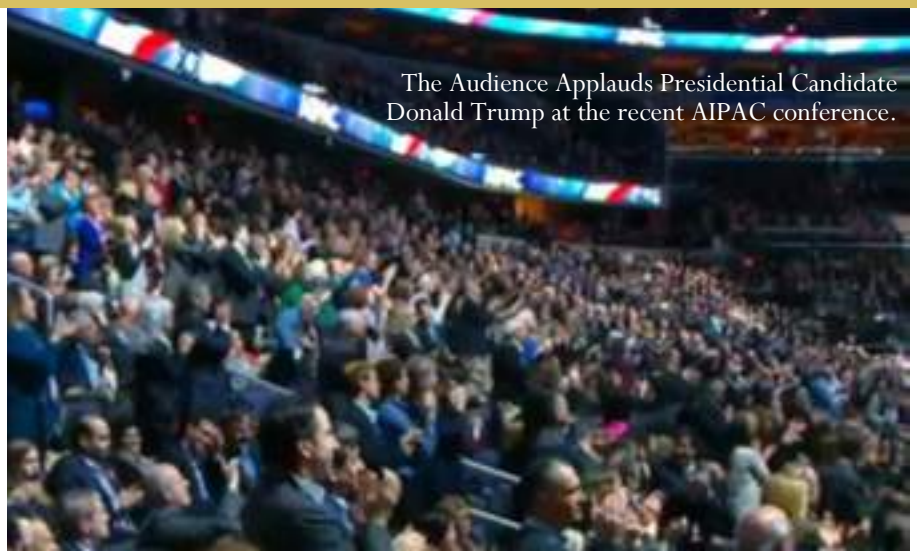
The Moral Bankruptcy of AIPAC

IVAN ROTHMAN



The Audience Applauds Presidential Candidate Donald Trump at the recent AIPAC conference.

What do Republicans Jim Jordan of Ohio and Scott Perry of Pennsylvania have in common? Two things: (i) they voted against certifying the 2020 election results; and (ii) they are among the 37 Republican candidates who, notwithstanding their votes against certification, were recently endorsed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Jim Jordan has also refused to testify before the congressional committee probing the January 6 insurrection despite his involvement in the violent events. Scott Perry has compared Democrats to Nazis and promoted white supremacist conspiracies. And a number of these AIPAC endorsees have disturbing histories of bigoted comments and actions against LGBTQ people and other minorities.

It is hardly necessary to elaborate on the danger posed to our democracy by baseless attempts to undermine the legitimacy of our electoral system just because we are unhappy with the results of an election. Not surprisingly, AIPAC's endorsement of these proponents of the "Big Lie" has subjected the organization to scathing criticism from different quarters, including Tom Dine, a former Executive Director of AIPAC, Abe Foxman, a former head of the Anti-Defamation League, and pro-Israel organizations such as J Street that are also deeply committed to the basic values of liberal democracy and, consequently, have pledged not to endorse candidates who voted against certifying Joe Biden as U.S. president.

What is perhaps most disturbing about AIPAC's endorsements is the justification AIPAC has offered its critics, namely, that AIPAC is a single-issue organization focused exclusively on Israel. Indeed, AIPAC's reputation as one of the two or three most effective U.S. lobbies is often credited to its razor-sharp focus on Israel. However, even if we assume that having Jordan, Perry, and others of their ilk in Congress is genuinely beneficial to Israel, it is impossible to ignore basic principles.

After all, we teach our children that the ends cannot always justify the means. AIPAC does, indeed, have a long history of flouting this principle by, for example, using coercive methods to intimidate politicians, academics, and others who do not toe the AIPAC line and branding critics of policies supported by AIPAC as Anti-Semites.

But surely there must be some red lines for an organization *based in the U.S.* that purports to be the leading voice of *American* Jews? AIPAC's last round of endorsements lies beyond the moral pale and crosses these lines. As Richard N. Hass, President of the Council on Foreign Relations stated in response to AIPAC's en-

dorsements: *"… it is morally bankrupt and short-sighted to back [those] who undermine democracy just because they support Israel. What ties the two countries is a commitment to democracy. An undemocratic America could easily distance itself from the Jewish state."*

Putting aside AIPAC's blatant disregard for the interests of American democracy, this seems like a good time to raise a different but related question, namely, what exactly has AIPAC's laser focus on policies it perceives as being in Israel's interest actually achieved for Israel? Even the most myopic supporter of Israel, even those who somehow have got comfortable with the notion of "managing the conflict," must concede that the status quo is less than ideal and that a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appears nowhere in sight.

For decades a two state solution (TSS) was widely regarded as the most promising framework to achieve such a resolution. Clearly, primary responsibility for the failure to implement the TSS lies first and foremost with the parties themselves, both the Palestinians and the Israelis. However, it would be an understatement to say that AIPAC's policies and actions have contributed significantly to this failure. For decades, AIPAC's lobbying efforts have only resulted in a distorted U.S. foreign policy toward Israel that has provided unconditional political cover and financial support for a host of Israeli policies and practices that have severely damaged the prospects for the TSS, including massive settlement and other infrastructure projects resulting in the de facto annexation of the West Bank, and unrelenting punitive measures of incarceration, deportations and targeted killings of Palestinians that have undermined the development of a united and more moderate Palestinian leadership. U.S. foreign policy toward Israel has, in fact, only played into the hands of the most right-wing, ultranationalist and expansionist elements of the Israeli polity.

There can be no doubt that AIPAC bares significant responsibility for this state of affairs. In his recent book, "Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality," Ian S. Lustick, a professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, has written:

> The massive, indeed overwhelming support that successive American administrations gave Israel, which crippled Israeli moderates and empowered Israeli maximalists, was sustained not by presidential preferences, cultural affinities between Israel and the United States, or prudent considerations of American national interest but instead by the calculations of American politicians *facing a sophisticated, powerful, single-issue movement* [emphasis added] … The American-spun cocoon around Israel has vastly distorted Israeli perceptions and greatly reduced the country's ability to gauge the real effects of its policies. The cocoon ruined the careers of dovish politicians while enhancing the prospects of those catering to Israeli fantasies. Opportunities for peace that might have been grasped were missed or destroyed.

Indeed, we now face a situation in which an increasing number of critics and students of the conflict, including Professor Lustick, are sounding the death knell of the TSS. These scholars maintain that years of settlement activity and other policies and practices inimical to the TSS have resulted in an irreversible one-state *reality* – a reality that will no longer allow the successful negotiation of two separate states. These views rely on a wide range of cultural, geographic, demographic, and infrastructural considerations, but tend to emphasize the presence of some 620,000 Israeli settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. As a diehard supporter of the TSS model, I find Professor Lustick's analysis and conclusions both compelling and disturbing and like to think there are

still, under the right political conditions, chances for the TSS to succeed. But what if Professor Lustick is right, what if the window for implementation of the TSS has finally slammed shut? What next? How does one move from a one-state reality to an acceptable and just one-state solution? What would such a solution look like?

Undoubtedly, the death of the TSS would pose significant conceptual and other challenges for individuals and Israeli and U.S.-based organizations, such as B'Tselem, Peace Now, the New Israel Fund, and J Street, which have dedicated so much time and effort to supporting and advocating for the TSS. However, these organizations have other things going for them. Any viable and just one-state solution will have to be based on the basic values of liberal democracy, including equality, toleration and self-determination, and self-realization for diverse constituent groups. These organizations, aside from being pro-Israel, in the very best sense of this term, are also deeply committed to these values. Consequently, if the future, indeed, lies with a one-state solution, these organizations will be able to adjust and play a constructive role in helping to fashion and support such a solution. In the case of J Street, for example, these values are firmly expressed in the organization's mission statement: *"Our work is grounded in the Jewish and democratic values on which we were raised. These values are central to who we are as a people: the principle that you should treat others the way that you would want to be treated yourself, basic notions of justice and freedom, the pursuit of peace, and tikkun olam —seeking to make the world a better place."*

Unfortunately, and as may be inferred from the organization's unprincipled support for politicians who may justly be labeled enemies of truth and fundamental democratic values, the case of AIPAC is different. As noted, for decades AIPAC has played an instrumental role in frustrating the realization of the TSS. Today, when the TSS may no longer be feasible, AIPAC, by endorsing and thereby siding with the most illiberal and chauvinistic forces in this country, has, in effect, also revealed itself as a likely opponent of any future attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the establishment of a robust liberal democracy between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, within which both the Jewish people and the Palestinians can fulfill their legitimate national and cultural aspirations while sharing the land and living in peace as equal citizens. It appears, then, that the status quo may well be all that AIPAC really has to offer. It is, therefore, reasonable to question AIPAC's moral fitness to serve as a legitimate political home for American Jews who care deeply about *both* the future of Israel *and* the health of American democracy and the liberal principles and values upon which it rests.

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The Way to Israeli Authoritarianism

DANIEL BAR-TAL

Photo by Zulmaury Saavedra on Unsplash

I claim that Israeli society has been sliding towards authoritarianism. That is, in the hybrid construction of the Israeli regime, the authoritarian components are on rise, while the democratic ones are in descent. This is not surprising, because all states involved in protracted and bloody conflict are predestined to the same process. A look at ongoing intractable conflicts easily indicates that Russia, fighting in Chechnya and Ukraine, Turkey involved in the Kurdish conflict, India in its Kashmir conflict, the Sri Lankan conflict between Tamils and Singhalese, or Rwanda with its conflict between Hutu and Tutsi, have all moved in the same direction of authoritarianism. All these conflicts involve bloody engagement over sacred goals, have lasted for over 40 years, require great investment and no peace-making process is in sight. One of the major explanations for the development of authoritarian regimes is based on their context of intractable conflict that dictates governing directions. Obviously, additional factors also play a role.

PENETRATION OF AUTHORITARIANISM INTO A SOCIETAL FABRIC

Conflicts require ideological justification, defense, resources, a legal system, and more. Society has to adapt to conflict conditions, to accommodate, to contain, to deal with, to live with the evolving context of prolonged conflict. But not all effects are intended- many of them are unintended and even undesirable. Nevertheless, they become part of the dynamic processes of societal change. Of importance for the understanding of the effects, we need to remember, that societies carry out violent immoral acts that lead to reactions and counter-reactions. These acts of violence, including terror, often have a profound effect on the societies engaged in conflict in many areas of personal and collective life. They cause losses and various types of physical and psychological harm that leave open wounds in the society and need to be taken care of. These lines of action must always leave their marks on collective

life, marks that may not appear overnight, but will gradually penetrate the societies involved in intractable conflict and change their nature. In addition, use of violence requires numerous steps to provide security for the involved societies. These, in turn, also have an impact on the life of individuals and the whole collective.

This means that when a society violates the fundamental principles of justice, morality, and human rights during an intractable conflict, it is condemned to deterioration and decline, at least in regard to its democratic, humane and moral qualities, and this also leads to a corresponding political downturn. Societies engaged in violent and vicious conflict become accustomed to mistreating the rival population. This penetrates into the norms, values, beliefs and attitudes of the societies and culture.

Prolonged conflicts require many different activities by both societies in many different domains. Each society initiates a well-planned and an unplanned series of acts, beginning with the military sphere, but also in the legal, political, economic, and other arenas– and they in turn trigger new developments that lead to intended or unintended effects. New goals, interests, needs, and trends appear at all levels of society. New dogmas arise to justify the continuing conflict; new interest groups emerge, new norms, language and moral standards develop to support the conflict; conflict-supporting economic investments are made. A new political culture evolves to maintain the conflict; new security needs and new military strategies are developed; new trade markets appear. New laws have to be legislated; the legal system always has to be involved in adapting new codes to the conflict situation. Sometimes groups emerge that object to the conflict and carry out a political struggle against it, reflecting the evolving socio-political polarization.

In general, the themes of conflict culture are central in public debates and agendas, policy-making and courses of action. They are hegemonic in the public repertoire and have great influence on individual and collective decision-making as, for example, in selecting leaders, or voting in elections. In addition, they influence the functioning of various societal institutions in different realms. They affect set policies, legislation, decision making and courses of actions as, for example, they influence national budget allocations, approval of educational curricula, and even rulings in the courts.

For example, the massive delegitimization of the rival frequently leads to atrocities, and other immoral behaviors, including genocide, without feelings of guilt or shame. It becomes a major justification for the violations of moral standards. This means that eventually the immoral behavior is not only performed towards the rival, but also reaches the intra-societal system when society members generalize their behaviors and overstep boundaries to commit immoral acts against their co-patriots and their own institutions. All this leads to the weakening of democratic principles. Societies that engage in an intractable conflict for a long time have great difficulty in maintaining democratic values and principles because the essence of the conflict demands their transgression.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE LASTING BLOODY CONFLICT

Focusing on the context of intractable conflict, the involved states have a number of critical challenges that require immediate solutions. The most important of these is mobilization of society members (of Russia, Turkey, Israel, Sri Lanka or Rwanda) to participate in their conflict not only attitudinally by supporting it, but also actively by recruitment to the military in order to fight the enemy. Each of these states requires mandatory military service and some,

like Israel, also have reserve duty. The goal is to win the conflict militarily as in Sri Lanka, Chechnya, and Rwanda, but the least that must be done is to withstand the enemy (Kurds, Palestinians, Muslims in Kashmir or Turkish Cypriots). However, even if one side wins militarily, as in the case of Russia, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka, the state has to be on constant alert to maintain deterrence with control of the rival group.

It was noted that interethnic conflicts are "written in blood" as described by Stephen Worchel, because it is extremely difficult for a state to win bloody conflicts with a population that experiences significant deprivation, discrimination, exploitation, and violation of basic human rights, along with denial of collective rights. With these contentions the ethnic groups live with suffering, frustration, fear, anger and hatred, searching for a possibility to rebel. And indeed, many ethnic groups have successfully raised the flag of resistance and satisfied their collective needs, following a violent struggle for independence or autonomy that lasted decades and even centuries.

In turn, the dominating society, sovereign in the state, must always remain on guard, with mobilized society members to prevent these outcomes by controlling the rival society. This control always comes with violent struggle that involves individuals, groups, organizations and even at times the whole society. In order to succeed in this mission, the society that desires to safeguard the occupation, domination, subjugation, or discrimination must maintain continuous mobilization of fighters with their readiness to fight and even sacrifice their lives on behalf of the society. This literally means mandatory recruitment to the military forces with the motivation to fight.

The motivation to fight actively and effectively against the rival depends on the psychological state of the society members. They must believe the threats of the rival as well as the leadership of their own group. In addition, the motivation to mobilize depends on the construction of persuasive, well-justified, narratives that elaborate on the justness of the conflict and the goals that must be achieved. Finally, the narratives supporting the conflict include delegitimizing the rival, self-collective glorification, sense of self-collective victimhood and well-required patriotism. These narratives have to be imparted and maintained continuously in society, for as long as the conflict lasts. Furthermore, to be effective,
they must be hegemonically held by the majority of society members and preserved by state institutions. In order to achieve this aim, the state uses an obvious range of means,
also used by other societies engaged in intractable conflicts.

LIMITATIONS OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

In most conflicts, a minority also appears in the state, proposing an alternative narrative which supports ending the conflict by compromise, and presents the rival in a humanized and legitimized way with the benefits of peace. Individuals and organizations representing this minority collect information about atrocities and violations of human rights committed by the institutions and the military forces of their own society. In turn, the government tries to block these messages in order to retain the support of the society members in the continuing conflict. Thus, organs and institutions of society try to eliminate the flow of information by imposing a variety of restrictions on these organizations. If these practices last for many years, they influence the political culture of the society – its openness, freedom of expression, level of tolerance, reflective thinking, and critical thinking. Societies that engage in a long period of violent conflict develop dogmatic closure, blind patriotism, and monopolization of patriotism with all their implication. This must

affect practices of the mass media and the educational system which prepares the younger generation to participate in the conflict.

In times of intractable conflict, the mass me-dia are often mobilized by the authorities and may also voluntarily marshal themselves for the group goals to provide information that is in line with the themes of the conflict-supporting narrative. In some countries, autonomous journalists are fired from their jobs and there have even been cases of killing independent ones. Some journalists practice self-censorship; others join the propaganda of the regime. The regime recruits cooperative journalists who are in agreement with the hegemonic conflict-supporting narratives, and social media, often activated by the regime, becomes dominant in supporting these narratives.

The Israeli media, for example, do not openly discuss questions of whether there is a relationship between acts of terror and the occupation or whether some activities of the Israeli army in the occupied territories may be considered terrorism, or whether there is similarity between acts of terror carried out by Jews during the British mandate against Arabs and British, and the terror of Palestinians. It does not discuss the unnecessary Israeli wars during which many hundreds of human lives were lost, such as in the 1956 war in Sinai, the 1000-day war of attrition at the Suez Canal, and the Lebanese wars. In general, it avoids presenting the daily life of the Palestinians, their suffering and the existing apartheid, focusing on their violence and terror attacks, presenting them as a result of blind evil. The educational system often not only provides a one-sided narrative but also indoctrinates students, prevents openness, and inhibits critical thinking. These practices have effects beyond the conflict-related themes, affecting the overall way of thinking, deliberation, and information processing.

Obviously, these acts limit the scope of democracy because one of the key principles of a democratic regime is freedom of information. But the governments of societies involved in intractable conflicts, such as Israel, Morocco, Sudan, Turkey, or Rwanda, direct the mass media and social media to provide information in line with governmental policies and practices regarding the conflict. Moreover, formal institutions discredit and limit individuals and organizations that oppose governmental policies in the conflict context. Every year Reporters Without Borders publishes the World Press Freedom Index, evaluating freedom of journalism in every state. We find Israel in 86th place among 180 states, place, Rwanda in 136th place, Sri Lanka in 147th place, Turkey in 149th and India in 150th. None of these countries can take pride in their press freedom.

Thus, all these societies have to create conditions for support of the continuation of the conflict and obstruct alternative messages that oppose the conflict-supporting narrative. By the nature of these two missions, states involved in intractable conflict move to the authoritarian side of the democratic-authoritarian axis.

TREATMENT OF THE RIVAL GROUP

Saying this, I have still not touched upon one key point that relates to the democratic deterioration of these states, namely, the violation of another key principle of democracy—equality. All states engaged in violent longstanding conflict with a minority discriminate against it, violate its human rights, persecute, and conduct acts of violence along with many other transgressions. Each of the noted states—whether Israel, Russia, Turkey, or India, initiate these practices against the rival ethnic minority. On every indicator, it is possible to find disparity between the majority group and the

minority group. In Turkey, there is persistent discrimination against Kurds. For example, the Kurdish language cannot be used in private and public schools,

The Turkish army displaces Kurds from their villages, Kurdish villages were destroyed in the 1990s, and in the early 2000s, Kurdish political parties were banned. Human rights courts and organizations have blamed Turkey for systematic violations of Kurdish human rights. In the case of Russia, it installed a pro-Russian dictatorial regime in Chechnya, that, with Russian help, has conducted abductions and arbitrary detentions and arrests. Human rights are violated systematically, with allegations of torture and executions.

In India, the ruling Hindu nationalist government under the leadership of Narendra Modi conducts policies and enacts legislation ensuring Hindu supremacy, especially against the Muslim minority, viewed as the enemy. The Hindu leaders often openly incite against Muslims and this rhetoric leads to violent attacks by Hindu mobs and even by police. A number of laws have been passed specifically to discriminate against and harm Muslims. For example, the government passed the discriminatory Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), which made religion a basis for granting citizenship. This led to fears that millions of Indian Muslims, including many families who have lived in the country for generations, could be stripped of their citizenship rights and disenfranchised. In addition, Modi has enacted a law which criminalized inter-faith marriage.

Israel, as this is clearly attested, also practices discriminatory regulations and laws against Palestinians. The occupation serves as a sacred ground for appropriating Palestinian land, settling Jews in the occupied territories, surveilling every aspect of Palestinian life, consistently violating their human rights, preventing every sign of resistance, and eventually building a political-legal-military system that institutionalizes the superiority of Jews over the Palestinians, which could be termed apartheid. Israel together with Morocco are the only two states that occupied territories against the will of the occupied population and did not give equal rights to the occupying population over 55 years.

It is possible to indicate events that signal that Israel has moved into nationalistic-religious-racist spheres. One example is the "March of Flags" on May 29, 2022, with many thousands of participants, of mainly religious nationalistic youth through the Muslim quarter of old Jerusalem, with the approval of the Israeli prime minister and other ministers, chanting "death to Arabs". This recalls similar marches expressing hate for Jews less than a hundred years ago in Europe. Finally, with the many violent events during the march, mostly Jews attacking Palestinians, the Israeli police arrested about 60 Palestinians and only 2 Jews.

In sum, the inevitable societal processes of authoritarianism plague every society that is engaged in intractable conflict because of its demanding features. Without hesitation, it can be stated that the occupation and the violent longstanding conflict have had a major influence on Israeli Jewish society. It has moved it into the realm of authoritarianism which had already appeared with the establishment of the state in 1948 when the bloody conflict with Arabs states broke out. With the passage of time, the interstate conflicts deescalated and even the possibility of peacemaking with the Palestinians appeared. But the constitutive obstructive events seriously undermined this direction and the communal conflict is focused on relations with Palestinians with the outlook of living by the sword for rest of our lives. In such a context the described inter-societal processes may lead Israel to a totalitarian abyss.

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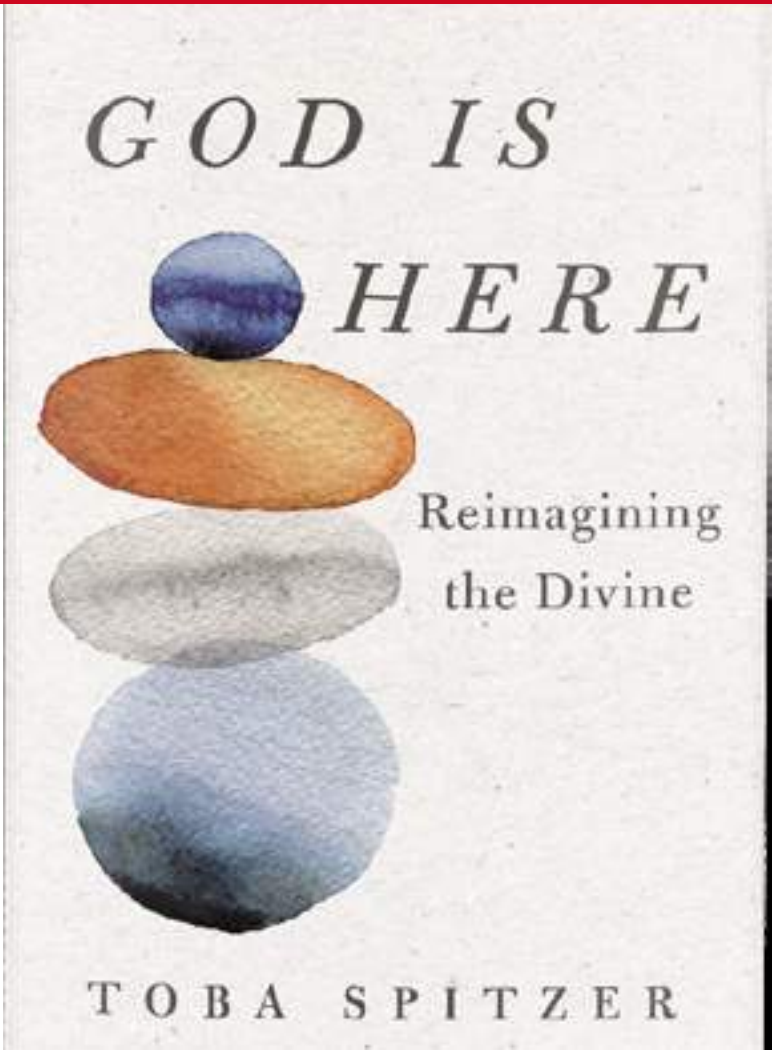
God is Here: Reimagining the Divine

RABBI NANCY FUCHS KREIMER



Book Review:
God is Here: Reimagining the Divine, by Toba Spitzer
St. Martin's Press, 2022,

Imagine a person—let's call her Jane. Jane has deep intuitions of awe, wonder, and the mystery of life. If she were comfortable with the word, she would say she has known grace. She cares about making the world a better place, and she strives to shape her own disposition and character into a better version of herself, a person with more courage and compassion. She has meditated and practiced yoga. She cannot, she will not pray to the God who is the Big Powerful Person, the King, the Commander-in-Chief. Yet, like Martin Buber (to whom we will return at the end of this review), she is open to using the word God as the place to put her most intimate questions, her yearnings, her resolve to cheat despair. She just doesn't know quite where that God is.

Imagine that, with luck, Jane's rabbi is Toba Spitzer, someone who has spent more than twenty-five years serving a congregation with people like Jane. Rabbi Spitzer has done a lot of learning, and a lot of living. She knows how to gently guide someone like Jane to understand that God is a word that can be redeemed and that once it is redeemed, there are practices, ancient and modern—even prayers—that will enhance her life.

Because she is one of the fortunate ones, she has Rabbi Spitzer by her side for the journey. For the rest, there is Spitzer's wonderful new book, God is Here. I can't wait to hand this book to all the Janes I know, not to mention rabbis and other clergy who, like me, will read and reread it, grateful beyond measure.

I opened God is Here with exceedingly high expectations, and I was not disappointed. Rabbi Spitzer is one of our most intelligent and thoughtful Reconstructionist rabbis, a leader in the non-Orthodox Jewish world. Indeed, she calls upon multiple Jewish sources—biblical, rabbinic, Hasidic, and mussar texts— along with a host of contemporary writers, from visionary science fiction author Octavia Butler to feminist activist adrienne marie brown. Throughout, Spitzer's gifts as a teacher, preacher, and spiritual guide shine through.

Rabbi Spitzer knows her people. Recent studies show that the fastest-growing religious denomination is SBNR—spiritual but not religious. It is not news that many people can't believe in God the King, the Lord, the Law Giver. What may be news is how many are potentially open to figuring out other names for the Divine, or to re-envisioning the name "God". Rabbi Spitzer knows that what many of these people need is an entirely new access point, a new way of thinking about the whole issue of who or what God is. Rabbi Spitzer wants to salvage the name "God"—not to make an arcane theological point, but to offer food and drink to the hungry and thirsty.

To use a central metaphor in this book, Spitzer wants to offer seekers an expanded menu. She reminds us that there are other human metaphors for God besides King (God as Parent, as Beloved, as Teacher), but her project here is to offer an array of non-human metaphors, drawn from the natural world, metaphors such as water, fire, rock, cloud. These metaphors are both new and old! They have a pedigree in the Bible, and they speak to our consciousness in this moment of ecological awareness, allowing us to relate to our ancient ancestors who were connected to their land. Most important, they give us multiple ways to connect to the Divine.

Even readers who are comfortable with addressing God as You will discover new joys through this project. As Spitzer explains, metaphors do not define God; they provide access to the experience of God. I read the chapter about water aloud to my partner on the way to a day at the ocean. Upon arrival, I found my heart expanding as I met my Friend (my own favorite metaphor for God) in a different guise.

Rabbi Spitzer does more than simply expand the menu. Every lived tradition, including ancient philosophical systems like Stoicism, includes disciplines or activities that ensure the system comes alive in the experience of the believer and trains the believer to live into the system's values. Rabbi Spitzer offers multiple practices for every metaphor she introduces. Most of us are familiar with Jewish food blessings and are aware of the cottage industry that has grown up around gratitude journals. But here, as she does in each chapter, Spitzer takes what might be familiar to the next level and in different directions. She suggests that it is also good to practice receiving appreciation. And why not keep a curiosity journal, to begin to appreciate not only the welcome but the unwelcome surprises in our lives? This practice, like many others in this book, feel especially relevant to our COVID times.

Rabbi Spitzer is careful to make practical suggestions and offer adaptations as necessary, making her practices both compelling and doable. You don't have a fireplace to gaze into? Watch a YouTube video of a crackling fire. You want to chant the beautiful words of Psalms? Rabbi Shefa Gold's website will offer you ways to learn the words and music. Spitzer's offerings include rewritten traditional blessings, familiar blessings used in new ways, and even some blessings that I, for one, had never heard of.

She continually reminds us that we are embodied creatures; we need practices that engage us not only from the neck up. Spitzer's approach to practice is capacious. I loved that she declares watching Queer Eye on Netflix a potential spiritual practice to affirm faith in humanity. (And I had thought it was a guilty pleasure!) She also knows, deeply, that solitary practice can only go so far, and that we humans need community, an insight she sources from the Jewish practice of requiring a minyan for prayer (a minimum of 10 people), the mussar va'ad (a small group working together on Jewish ethical practices), and twelve-step groups.

Personal narrative can serve as a power-

ful entrée as people try to wrap their minds around the more obscure world of theology, and Rabbi Spitzer knows how to make skillful use of her own life story. Glimpses into her life are judiciously interspersed with a gentle hand. Without turning the book into a memoir, Rabbi Spitzer makes the metaphors and practices come alive through story. We learn of moments of finding her own identity, of awe, of loss and grief, of activism. In especially moving passages, Rabbi Spitzer illustrates God as the source of teaching and guidance by sharing learning from her own parents. And the experiences she shares are not only hers. All these stories take what begins as a menu and make it come to life in a rich and satisfying meal.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement, does not appear in Spitzer's book by name, and for good reason. This is a Reconstructionist theology for our time and also a work that has the potential to speak to a much larger audience. Yet Kaplan's influence is evident in three ways. First, early in the last century, Kaplan believed that science and religion, far from being in conflict, would actually prove to be mutually enlightening. Rabbi Spitzer makes use of the science of cognitive linguistics, in particular the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in order to help us understand how we make meaning of the world around us and move beyond the question of "does God exist?".

Second, Kaplan's emphasis on function is present throughout. At the beginning of the book, Spitzer enumerates the many ways that belief in God has functioned and might function in people's lives, and then follows up with an effort to reconstruct God language with natural metaphors, demonstrating how different languages might serve the same functions. If traditional God ideas served as a source of meaning, perspective, values, and support in hard times, how much of that can be retained when we turn to non-human metaphors? It turns out, quite a lot.

Finally, Kaplan made use of process theology, based on the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, offering a new definition of God as "the process that makes for salvation", or as some process theologians put it "the potential of potentialities". This redefinition often appeals to the head more than the heart. Spitzer has also read process theology, but she makes it come alive, speaking to our varied human experience. She offers a plethora of metaphors because she understands that people experience the Divine in multiple ways.

For Kaplan, this effort at reconstruction was needed for twentieth-century American Jews to find their way comfortably into the synagogue and, if not pray, at least find meaning in identification with the Jewish people. He hated to see intellectual scruples and lack of traditional belief keep Jews from participating in Jewish community and life. Rabbi Spitzer has a larger audience. She knows that Judaism has resources—including multiple metaphors, practices, and insights—that can be offered not only to Jews but to seekers of many backgrounds. Judaism can take its place alongside the other world spiritual traditions. It is the sharing of those traditions, "deep ecumenism" as dubbed by Matthew Fox, that is one of the great spiritual adventures of the 21st century.

If I had one quibble with this book, it would be about a word Rabbi Spitzer uses that I wish had been qualified a bit. Spitzer refers to letting go of the "fantasy" of God as "a superhero who will show up and save the day". It would have been worth pausing there for a minute to say that this "fantasy" is actually also a metaphor, just like the ones she has been offering. That, of course, is actually her whole point. We cannot think about the Mystery without metaphors and pictures, more or less fantastic, to describe that which is beyond words. As the

rabbis themselves said, the Torah speaks in the language of humans. (Berachot 31b)

I know that Spitzer has deep respect for people with a variety of hermeneutics and metaphors. That is clear in other places in the book. For example, in a passage in which she talks about people she visited as a pastor in a detention center, Spitzer says, with genuine humility, that they seemed to have more faith than she. She believes that they are people of good hearts and good minds. In Rabbi Spitzer's experience, some metaphors have proven damaging and others healing. From a pastoral perspective, great harm can be done by some versions of God, and the one Rabbi Spitzer offers has proven, in her own work with people, to be far more psychologically sound. But this passage felt a little patronizing toward the folks who do believe in the superhero, who find that metaphor meaningful, and do not see it as "fantasy."

The 2021 film "Don't Look Up," a darkly humorous satire, portrays a contemporary American society (too close for comfort) as it ignores a coming apocalypse at its own peril. The movie is a far-from-subtle allegory reminding viewers of the ecological disaster that awaits. Three scientists exhibit courage as they confront politicians, journalists, talk-show hosts, and a self-promoting tech guru, to no avail. One of the media folks, knowing the end is nigh and asked if she wants to pray, says "I'd rather drink and talk shit about people." It is almost an entirely secular, ultimately shallow story, with no hint of transcendence, either within humanity or beyond.

Almost, but not entirely. There is a scene near the end, a family dinner table at which the three scientists (who had tried without success to warn everyone of the coming catastrophe) talk softly with one another and share what they are grateful for. Says one, "I am grateful that we tried." The scientist with whose "not very religious" family the group is gathered feels something is lacking.

"Maybe an "Amen?" he suggests.

"Amen???" his wife asks. "Just 'Amen'?"

And then, out of the blue, the boyfriend of one of the scientists, an earnest hippie evangelical (an improbable late addition to the group), says "I've got this". Everyone joins hands, bows their heads, and is led, with reverence, in a prayer. "Dearest Father and Almighty Creator, we ask for your grace tonight despite our pride, your forgiveness, despite our doubt. Most of all, Lord, we ask for your love to soothe us through these dark times."

The Hollywood writers may have not meant this to be quite as poignant a scene as it felt to me. Not wanting to give it the final word, they added not one but two cynical jokes after the credits roll, more jabs at the bleak prospects for the human endeavor. But that prayer is a moment of light in a very dark world. Its metaphors are not those of Rabbi Spitzer, but I feel certain she would honor the power of that scene. In the end, it is all metaphor, both the Father and Lord who loves us and the many beautiful natural images Rabbi Spitzer provides in this book. And in those moments when the comet is about to hit, or something far less dire but equally disorienting, they are not metaphors at all. Just the One we call out to, not merely describe in metaphor, but address as You, in something we might call faith.

We return, as promised, to Buber. Realizing how much good and evil have been done in the name of God, how many have rejected the name because of the injustices it has authorized, and how many others have given their lives for it for reasons both noble and problematic, Buber concludes that, in the end, there is really no better word than God.

"If I took the purest, most sparkling concept…I could not capture the presence of (that) whom

the generations of men have honoured and degraded with their awesome living and dying....We cannot cleanse the word 'God' and we cannot make it whole; but, defiled and mutilated as it is, we can raise it from the ground and set it over an hour of great care." (Martin Buber, Eclipse of God (London: Gollancz, 1953), 17-18.)

We are in such an hour, and this beautiful book will help many of us raise up that Name.

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Jewish Injustice: On the Role of Women Witnesses

RENA BEATRICE GOLDSTEIN

> We have to question the intentions of any group that insists on disdain toward other people as a membership requirement. It may be disguised as belonging, but real belonging doesn't necessitate disdain.
>
> Religion is another example of social contract disengagement. First, disengagement is often the result of leaders not living by the same values they're preaching. Second, in an uncertain world, we often feel desperate for absolutes. It's the human response to fear.

- Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage To Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*

A friend of mine (I'll call her Rebecca) is getting married. She asked me a year before her wedding to sign her ketubah (in Hebrew הבותכ ; Jewish marriage contract) as a witness. Three weeks before her wedding, Rebecca calls. My signature, she explains, cannot validate the marriage because I am a woman. Some Orthodox and Conservative sects of Judaism do not validate ketubot signed by women witnesses. Rebecca wants her child(ren) to have the option to become orthodox if they choose. She does not want any doubt about the legitimacy of her marriage.

Rebecca apologizes for the change in plan. I was gracious on the phone, kindly reassuring her that I understood. I'll be honest, though, I felt sad. Rebecca decided to follow the law: only men's signatures legitimize a marriage contract. Rebecca and her fiancé (whom I'll call Isaac), a soon-to-be Rabbi, are supporting a negative view about the reliability of women's testimony. In other words, this law is a call back to a time when women were not

considered reliable testifiers. As a philosopher who writes on testimonial injustices, how could I possibly support her? I am troubled by such thinking.

From Rebecca's perspective, she wants her children to have all the opportunities available to them in the Jewish community—any Jewish community—that they may wish to one day embrace. This means that their marriage, and hence the ketubah, must be beyond reproach. Some couples choose to have two separate ketubahs, but Rebecca and Isaac were sensitive to legal questions about the validity of the ketubah. Given the constraints, Rebecca's decision is understandable. She is thinking about what's in the best interest of her future child(ren).

I am aware that those who subscribe to the orthodox position rely on rabbinic sources to justify interpretations of the law. Maimonides, for instance, argued that the exclusion of women is justified on the basis that the Torah refers to witnesses using masculine language. For this reason (amongst others I'll discuss later) women are not qualified to serve as witnesses. Rabbi Susan Grossman (2004), on the other hand, has questioned whether prohibition of women testifiers falls under "*gezerart HaMelech*, [or] an immutable command from God our sovereign" (p. 2). That is, the prohibitions of women testifiers come from the best effort of the sages to understand God's will as expressed in the Torah. Some contend that the sage's interpretations occur within a specific social-political climate that must be taken into account. The orthodoxy tends to leave aside the *lived experience* of Toraitic sources. While I do not agree with it, I understand that excluding women as a witness (even in limited cases like that of capital punishment) is a hermeneutical position taken by the orthodox.

Should modern Toraitic interpretations account for past social-political climates? If so, then to what extent? It is this question that Conservative Rabbis must always contend. This question gives rise to a dichotomy between changing practice to meet modern social norms and adhering to traditional biblical interpretations. As Rabbi Grossman writes, "the Conservative Movement is built upon the balance between tradition and change" (p. 11).

Some Conservative Rabbis also adhere to the orthodox hermeneutical position. This means that they take the interpretations settled in the Mishna or the Talmud as the law. Maimonides argued that women are to be excluded as witnesses. Therefore, women are not to be witnesses. Other Conservative Rabbis may not adhere to the orthodox hermeneutical position, but they might have justifiable reasons for maintaining such legal practices. Some might recommend adherence to such legal practices in effort to protect their congregants. In the case of the *ketubah*, there could be consequences if a *ketubah* is not in keeping with standard practices: it may not be considered valid. A Conservative Rabbi suggesting only men sign *ketubot* as witnesses may not agree with the legal practice but may recommend it given the current social-political realities.

For context, Rebecca and I grew up in the Conservative Jewish movement. My upbringing straddled both the Jewish community of Las Vegas and Los Angeles, while Rebecca grew up in Los Angeles. We met after Bat Mitzvah age (14-15 years old), attended weekend programs during the school year with United Synagogue Youth (a Conservative Jewish youth group), and spent summers together at Camp JCA Shalom (a non-denominational Jewish summer camp in Malibu, California). Isaac did not grow up in Los Angeles but moved here when he began the rabbinical program at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

Growing up as a woman in the Conservative Jewish movement in the western United States

has been challenging. Without question, there has been progress for women's inclusion in ceremonial rituals. I had a Bat Mitzvah, though many of my mother's generation did not. I can sit with the men in a Conservative synagogue during services. I went to Hebrew School, and my father studied Torah with me every Saturday. I am educated. I can read and write Hebrew. These are just some of the equitable changes which have been made in the Conservative Jewish movement to more justly incorporate women.

In the Conservative movement, I'm constantly coming up against an invisible barrier. For instance, my father is a Kohen (והכ ;priest), but I can't inherit the Kohen bloodline or participate in the high holiday ritual blessing. I don't count in a minyon (וינ מ ; minimum number required for collective prayer). In my synagogue, it was never a requirement for a woman to wear a kippa (היפ כ ; head covering) or tallit (ית לט ; prayer shawl), yet for my brother it was. My brother was gifted t'fillin (ין לפת ; two square boxes with scriptural passages worn on the forehand and the left arm) at his Bar Mitzvah, though my sisters and I never were. These are just some of the traditional rites in which women are still not fully equal; the exclusion is subtle. Not everyone thinks that these practices (like it being optional for women to wear kippot in shul) are exclusionary. Yet the optionality of some ritual practices signals women are less important than men. It signals women are still second class.

I am going to point to one more subtle exclusion, one more invisible barrier: the qualifications of being a witness. Considerable attention has been paid to the ketubah as contractual document in Jewish theology. You can find books written on its history, and articles on how to rephrase the sexist, archaic language for the modern age. But little attention has been paid to the gendered role of the witness, a role that still to this day excludes women from the practice. For the remainder of the article, I discuss the role of the witness, specifically the role that men occupy and the rule by which women are excluded. I will argue that Rabbis in the Conservative movement ought to solidify their stance on the role that women have in religious ceremonial practices, specifically the practice of witnessing signings of ketubot. I suggest that Rabbis should base the qualification for being a witness on values rather than biology.

WITNESSES OF THE KETUBAH

Ketubah (הבותכ) translates to "written instrument" (Epstein 2004, p. 4). As is to be expected, there are debates as to the historical origin of the ketubah. Some believe the ketubah was identical to the Shetar Kiddushin and is thus the oldest marriage contract. While others argue that the two are not the same, and indeed the Shetar is older, with the ketubah having been instituted as a reform to the Shetar (Zeitlin 1933, p. 2). Similarly, there are debates over whether the ketubah validated a marriage (that is, consummated it) or merely recorded the obligations of the husband as a legal protection for the bride (Epstein 2004, p. 5-6). Louis Epstein argues that (at least part of the purpose of) the ketubah was to make sure the groom could not put off marriage or easily divorce if he grew tired of her (2004, pgs. 20-24). It eventually became practice that the ketubah be in the safekeeping of the bride.

Whatever its historical origin, we know today that in the western United States, in the Conservative Jewish movement the role of the *ketubah* is merely ceremonial. It does not consummate marriages, for those betrothed must still obtain a marriage license from the secular county. Epstein (2004, p. 31) argues that the adoption of the *ketubah*, and other writs by the Jewish people developed due to secular

economic interests. He notes from the lack of reference to a ketubah between such biblical figures as Rebecca and Isaac, Jacob and Leah, Jacob and Rachel, and Ruth and Boaz the *ketubah* is not an original Jewish institution but is, in fact, originally an institution of Babylonia. Contact between Babylonia and Judea introduced the writ to the Jewish people. Today, language is generalized, the typeface stylized. It does not have the same purpose as a writ of acquisition.

What does the *ketubah* look like today? Above is the stylized, embellished ketubah of my Sephardic grandparents, Silvy and Carol Alcalay, married in 1953 at the Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel in Los Angeles, California.

It reads:

On the first day of the week, the fifteenth day of the month of Tamuz in the year 5713 corresponding to the twenty-eighth day of June in the year 1953 the holy Covenant of Marriage was entered into in Los Angeles, California between the groom Silvy son of Solomon and Alice Alcalay and the bride Carol Beatrice daughter of Albert and Irene Rugeti.

The bridegroom made the following declaration to his bride: "Be thou, my wife, according to the laws of Moses and Israel. I faithfully promise that I will be a true husband unto thee; I will honor and cherish thee; I will protect and support thee, and will provide all that is necessary for thy sustenance in accordance with the usual custom of Jewish husbands. I also take upon myself all such further obligations for thy support as are prescribed by our religious statues." And the bride has entered into this holy Covenant with affection and sincerity and has thus taken upon herself the fulfillment of all the duties incumbent upon a Jewish wife.

This Covenant of Marriage is valid and binding according to the tradition of Israel.

This *ketubah* was witnessed by Samuel Toby and Morris N. Tarica and signed by the groom, the bride, and the Rabbi, Jacob Ott.

What does it take to validate a ketubah? In the mishna it states that the contract is valid on the basis of two witnesses (Gittin 22b).

ר' אלעזר היא דאמרעדי מסירה כרתי

Here are some translations:

> Whosoever killeth any nefesh, the rotze'ach shall be put to death by the mouth of edim (witnesses); but ed echad (one witness) shall not testify against any nefesh to cause him to die. (Bamidbar 35:30).

> One witness alone will not be sufficient to convict a person of any offense or sin of any kind; the matter will be established only if there are two or three witnesses testifying against him. (Deuteronomy 19:14-16).

> One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth. By the mouth of two witnesses or by the mouth of three witnesses shall the matter be established (Deuteronomy 19:14-16).

According to Deuteronomy 19:14-16, two witnesses are required to validate *ketubot*. The classical ketubah is the document conveying the testimony of the two witnesses only. It required their signatures. Not that of groom or bride. Only in the current moment have some included the couple's signature. The signatures of the witnesses establish that two people saw the same thing. One person can perhaps be bribed or mistaken. But if two people witness the signing of a contract, there is good reason to believe that the contract was signed under appropriate conditions.

Historically, the signing of ketubot was not ceremonial. It was a contract between families. In biblical times, the presence of a Rabbi was

not required. Required were two literate witnesses. But we have developed traditions that have been cemented into practice. Indeed, in the mishna it states, "only priests, levites, and those who intermarried with priests signed *ketubot*" (mishna, as cited by Episten 2004, p. 48). Priests and levites held positions that required literacy. Today, in our vastly more literate society, the qualifications of being a witness vary significantly, largely depending on the interpretation of the law agreed to in of each Jewish denomination.

The reform movement was created to ensure that laws treated congregants equally—it removed the legal separation between men and women. From the reform perspective, there is no problem with women serving as witnesses. The qualification of being witness to a *ketubah* in the reform movement largely depends on whether one is a decent human being (of any sex) and a mature person (above *b'nei mitzvah* age). The orthodoxy, on the other hand, adhere to the following four requirements. In most cases, for a witness to be trusted, the witness must be

1. Male
2. A Sabbath observer
3. Follows the laws of kashrut
4. Fulfill the requirements of orthodox halakha (Hebrew: הכלה ; religious law)

Meeting these four requirements establishes the witness as someone is who trustworthy in the eyes of the community. At times, a witness may be trusted on this basis, even if they are not otherwise reliable. Moreover, it can serve as the basis for a get (גט ; divorce document) if a witness is found not to meet one of these requirements.

The Conservative movement has a variety of approaches. Depending on the community, some, more reform-leaning-conservative Rabbis, may follow the base rule that a *ketubah* must be signed by two witnesses. The witnesses, on this view, are signing a visual contractual agreement, and to be a witness to a contractual agreement does not entail belonging to a sexual category or following a denominationally-specific Jewish religious practice. Other, more orthodox-leaning-conservative Rabbis follow the orthodoxy requirements, entailing that the witnesses must be male. The official law is that women can serve as witnesses. In 1974, the Committee on Jewish Law Standards, acknowledging the change of the social status of women, voted that women can serve as witnesses, including on *ketubbot* (Grossman, p. 11).

The issue of who counts as a trustworthy witness brings out a difference between the community and the denominational fiat. There is an old Yiddish saying, "Every Rabbi makes the rules of Shabbos for himself." Within a community, there may be variation among the congregants with regards to ritual practice; that is, who counts as a witness will, in part, depend on the members of the community to validate a trustworthy observer. As established by my own experience, there are Rabbis in the Conservative denomination who adhere to the same requirements for witnesses as the orthodox denominations: a trustworthy witness is someone who is male. Modern social norms, however, dictate that this requirement is prejudicial to women. Thus, the Rabbis in the conservative denominations must struggle with the dichotomy between changing social norms and adhering to tradition.

Rabbis of the Conservative denomination ought to consider that meeting the requirements of #2-4 (Sabbath observer; follows the laws of kashrut; fulfills the requirements of halakha) is quite different than meeting requirement #1 (male). For one thing, requirements #2-4 are choices a person makes in life. These are things one can either *do* or *not do*

depending on one's values. Following the laws of kashrut or keeping the sabbath are moral requirements. When one comes of *b'nei mitzvah* age, one makes the choice to meet these requirements. Consider, too, that requirements #2-4 are easier to misrepresent because it is not written for what period (years, months, days) one must fulfill the halakha before becoming a witness.

Since requirements #2-4 are not easily verified, it is left for conscience. Conscience in the Conservative movement is variable. Adherence to the requirements of halakha can vary between members. Some, like my father, drove to Shul every Saturday. He observed the sabbath in a modern way. After Shul, he napped, studied Torah with his children, and then watched baseball. That's how he observed the Sabbath. He also kept kashrut both in the out of the home, but he ate at restaurants that weren't kosher.

Other members of our Conservative congregation only kept kosher in the home but ate non-kosher meat in restaurants. Still, others only kept kosher when in Temple, but in their own homes or at restaurants they did not. Similarly, with the Sabbath, some members only went to Shul to pray on high holidays or during other special events (like for a *b'nei mitzvah*). Some just sent their children to Hebrew School and never came to services themselves. In the Conservative movement, there is more latitude for fulfilling the requirements of halakha. And this latitude makes adhering to the second, third, and fourth requirements of being a witness (that is being a Sabbath observer, following the laws of *kashrut*, and fulfilling other requirements of *halakha*) less certain and less verifiable.

The one requirement that is easily verified is being male. One's biological anatomy is not a choice, unlike following the laws of halakha. Being male does not demonstrate one's values. Choosing to fulfill the requirements of halakha does. If we are creating a more egalitarian society, the relevant consideration ought to be based on values, not on predestined biology.

WOMEN AS WITNESSES

If the relevant consideration of who can and cannot be a witness is based on one's values, as demonstrated through one's choices, then biology is not germane. Women should be able to be witnesses if they are Sabbath observers, keep kosher, and fulfill other requirements of halakha— or meet whatever moral responsibilities a community dedicates to reliable observes.

The reason women have been excluded from participating in practices like witnessing is in virtue of a perception of biology and its relation to testimonial reliability. Women have menstrual cycles, and the menstrual cycle is associated with uncleanliness. Uncleanliness is associated with unreliability. Thus, women are not seen as reliable sources of testimony in virtue of their biology.

In an article published in the *Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly* (2001), Rabbi Susan Grossman shows that Rabbis used to consider women's testimony reliable only in cases when determining fact was necessary. For instance, a woman's testimony about parentage was often considered reliable. This was quite important, as women carry on the Judaic bloodline. Children are Jewish if the mother is Jewish. A man without a Jewish mother—no matter how religious he is, whether he wears tefillin, doesn't drive on Shabbat, keeps kosher, or is circumcised—is not himself Jewish.

In other regards, however, women's testimony was considered unreliable, which disqualified women are witnesses (Grossman 2001,

p. 3). This is a strange polarity: on the one hand, women are the bearers of religious progeny; on the other, they are excluded from, among other ceremonial practices, serving as a witness on the *ketubah*.

Rabbi Grossman argues that such a perception of women reflected the social status women held in society. Yet women's social statuses have changed. Today, women have more equal rights under the law. Women serve as judges and lawyers, own businesses, and are physicians. The secular testimony of women is held in higher esteem in both Israel and the U.S.. In both the U.S. and in Israel, women serve on the Supreme Courts, as members of congress and parliament, and Governors. Indeed, Rabbi Grossman points out that the Rabbinic qualifications of being an eligible witness have not changed. What has changed is the number of those who now qualify (p. 11).

However, in the Conservative Movement, the legitimacy of women's testimony is still under discussion. In response to Rabbi Grossman's argument that women should be able to serve as witnesses, Conservative Rabbi Aaron Mackler argued that there are "great risks" to women serving as witnesses in some cases, such as divorce (2004, p. 2). He writes, "At the current time, the risks entailed by women witnessing *gittin* (divorce) are unacceptable. A woman's witnessing a get would render that document ineffective for virtually all Orthodox rabbis, and some Conservative rabbis" (p. 4). He argues that the same can be said of marriage documents as well, although the "risks are small enough that, in many cases, a rabbi could in good conscious accept and even recommend such witnessing" (p. 4). Rabbi Mackler "hope(s) and expect(s) that the activity of women as witnesses will enjoy overwhelming acceptance among Conservative Jews…but that time has not yet arrived" (p. 4).

More recently, in *The Theory and Practice of Universal Ethics - The Noahide Laws* (2014), Rabbi Shimon Cowen argues that the Noahide Law (the universal message of Torah to humanity) makes women the determinant of familial relationships. This determination justifies the exclusion of women as testifiers on the basis that women have emotional reach, yet "justice calls for fixity in perception and a stilling of emotion" (p.261). He notes that excluding women as a *sole witness* applies *only* in the case of capital punishment. The reason is that taking the life of a criminal defendant ("the greatest 'right' of the human being) must be done with "dispassionate reference to the 'abstract rights and universal norms' set out by Divine—Noahide—law" (p. 263). Women "deliver, nurture, and protect life" (p. 262). As such, they cannot dispassionately judge cases of capital punishment.

This interpretation of Noahide Law as presently justifying the exclusion of women's testimony, even in limited cases like that of capital punishment, circles a question I pose in my article: to what extent should modern concepts and/or arguments be taken into account? For instance, philosophers of science, since the '70s, have challenged the assumption that 'bad' rational (or scientific) decision making results if the practice is shaped by values, interests, and commitments (see, e.g., Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 1970). Such arguments have been extended to medical decision-making, where knowledge (narrowly stipulated) requires a kind of transcending base experiences, which includes emotionality (see, e.g., Lorraine Code' *What Can She Know* 1990). Code argues that requiring our concept of knowledge to be that which transcends experience creates a kind double-bind for women. Stereotypes that represent women as more emotional and less incapable of abstract thought indicate that women only have access to experience and are not capable of acquiring

the relevant methodological tools required for knowledge (à la Aristotle). Indeed, exclusionary practices that keep women from authoritative positions as knowers are often rationalized on the grounds that men have access to both knowledge and experience and that women have inferior capabilities. Dichotomizing knowledge and experience in this way converge to keep women "within undervalued cognitive domains and thwart their efforts to gain recognition as authoritative members in epistemic communities" (p. 223). As Code, and others, have argued, knowledge does not transcend experience or emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence indicates the degree to which one understands how emotions affect one's judgment. This kind of intelligence requires, not excluding emotion from rational judgments but rather, an understanding of what an emotion communicates about the situation and one's interaction with it. It is a form of understanding one's subjective location within the world and evaluating that location during the process of producing knowledge claims.

The debate within Conservative Judaism leaves my friends, Rebecca and Isaac, in a precarious position as they think about their future and the Jewish future of their children. They want to make sure that their children are recognized as Jewish. They want there to be no question about the validity of their marriage. What throws this into question is the fact that there are denominations of Judaism that would doubt a contract signed by a woman. This is a difference between what the law says and what is done in social practice.

It seems trivial not to allow women to sign *ketubahs* as witnesses. If women can't be witnesses, what's the value of a woman's signature on the document? You can see where my grandmother signed her name in Figure 1. Her signature on the document indicates that she agrees to the contract. Rebecca will be signing her ketubah. It won't be her father signing the contract on her behalf (as was once done). Rebecca's signature validates the contract. But if Rebecca were to sign as a witness it would not be valid. A woman's signature on the ketubah seems both valid and invalid.

When we come to a contradiction in our practices, it gives us good reason to re-evaluate them.

Judaism is not inflexible. It is flexible in many ways. We are commanded to rest on the Sabbath, however, a doctor is permitted to work if a life is at risk. We are commanded to fast on Yom Kippur, however, it is acceptable to drink water or eat in conjunction medications. One witness is acceptable if it is impossible to find two to sign a contract. The priorities in Judaism have always been health (or life circumstances) then rules.

Indeed, the act of witnessing has undergone multiple changes. Epstein argues that, at one point, the witnesses weren't required to sign the *ketubah*. Witnesses were only required to be named as present for the transaction. It was later reported in the *mishna* that a rabbinic enactment made signatures obligatory "for the convenience of the public" (Epstein 2004, p. 46-7). That is, at one point the law changed so that witnesses were required. With the rabbinic enactment, literacy became important for these transactions.

Another change to the act of witnessing occurred when it became impractical to witness deeds in person. The old way required both the witnesses and the contracting parties to be at the same place at the same time to validate the contract (Epstein, p. 49). As commerce expanded, this became less practical. The law was changed. The role of the witness diverged. One could be a witness as the *'ede mesirah*, that is to physically witness the transaction (p. 49), or one could be an *'ede hatimah*, a witness who

signed the writ (p. 50).

Another change occurred when oral pronouncements of marriage were replaced by written contracts (p. 55). Originally, the marriage was pronounced by the bride's father. In the Bible it is written, "Thus Laban **says** to Eliezer, 'Behold, Rebecca is before thee, take her and go, and she *be wife* to thy master's son" (Genesis 24, 51). Later the Talmud required the husband to make the pronouncement: "Behold, thou art consecrated unto me according to the law of Moses and Israel" (p. 56). Not only was there a change between oral and written pronouncements, but there was also a change with regards to *who* makes the pronouncement. The bride's father was replaced by the husband.

Similarly, there were changes around the practice of the *mohar* (Hebrew מוהר, "the purchase price"). First, it was paid to the bride's father, but later it was paid directly to the bride. At first, the *mohar* was a marriage price, later a divorce cost.

The best change of all occurred when women finally had to *agree* to the marriage contract, rather than just being like some beef sold. Eventually, she had to sign the contract herself.

Some areas of Jewish practice have no flexibility. The rules that exclude women from practice tend to be strict. This isn't a Jewish or religious matter—it's societal. Recall that it was through contact with Babylonia that the practice of a writ was introduced to the Jewish people. The *Shetar*, and the *ketubah* developed from it, was borrowed from a secular practice. That it was adopted from a secular practice reinforces the idea that the qualifications of being a witness ought to be flexible as secular practice changes.

If women are excluded as witnesses on *ketubot*, it reflects poorly on the relationship between words and deeds. Conservative Rabbis say they support the rights of women. However, the disparate actions of Conservative Rabbis, some refusing women as witnesses, demonstrates the opposite behavior. Disallowing women to serve as witnesses perpetuates injustice against women. The Conservative Jewish Movement should cement the requirements of being a witness on ketubot. Without cemented requirements, there is confusion, and women within the Conservative movement continue to be excluded.

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The Exodus from Egypt in the Urgency of Now

ARYEH COHEN

> It happened once [on Pesach] that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon were reclining in Bnei Brak and were telling the story of the exodus from Egypt that whole night, until their students came and said to them, "The time of [reciting] the morning Shma has arrived". (Haggadah of Pesach)

FOUR GREAT RABBIS WERE GATHERED FOR THE Passover seder in the Palestinian town of Bnei Brak. They told the story of the exodus all night long. They were so involved in the telling that their students had to interrupt them in the morning so that they would not miss the appointed time for saying the Shma. So what were they talking about for so long? The Haggadah itself does away with the exodus in a sentence: "We were slaves to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt. And God, our God, took us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched forearm." Obviously we ourselves have figured out how to enhance the bare bones of the story. The bulk of the traditional telling is a midrashic understanding of one of the Torah's narratives of the exodus (Deuteronomy 26). And still… all night long?

There are two ways to think about what these great sages were talking about. Well, actually, there are probably untold numbers of ways of thinking about what they were up to. I want to present two options amongst many for what occupied the Palestinian sages that Passover night so long ago.

The rabbis might have started by reading the "We were slaves" line and asking: What was slavery like? What were the details of oppression? How did the suffering manifest itself? Each sage besting their fellow in telling excruciating tales of pain. Children bricked into walls. Men separated from women. Whips, hunger, broken bodies, constant humiliations, indiscriminate murders. On top of it all, the constant refrain that the Israelite faith, language, tradition was destined for humiliation for all time.

After talking of the suffering of their enslaved ancestors in such gory detail, the blows that God brought down upon the Egyptians would be, even in the retelling, so satisfying. The Pharoah, the kings of kings, the one who asked "Who is God that I should heed God's voice to send off Israel? I do not know God, nor will I send off Israel," was brought low by God and then by his own people who demanded that he free the Israelites.

Egypt was destroyed. Its fields, its flocks, its waterways, and finally its first born. Then, also, on the Sea, Egypt's military might was literally washed away. "This is my God and I will glorify him."

One can imagine these learned rabbis bringing all their erudition to bear in detailing and enhancing and extolling the suffering and then the glorious liberation. "Beginning with disgrace and ending with glory." As the sun rises, the students knock on the door, and the glow on their teachers' faces shows them that they are ready to pledge the unity of God.

There is another possibility. The rabbis began with the sentence "We were slaves to Pharaoh in the land of Egypt. And God, our God, took us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched forearm." Then they asked the question "how could that have happened?" How could it be that one people, the Egyptians of yore, saw it as possible, as justifiable, as morally upright to enslave another people?

This is where the conversation started. What were the ideological underpinnings of Egyptian supremacy? How could the Israelites have acquiesced in that ideology and not immediately risen up against it? When there were flickers of rebellion, why were they extinguished so quickly? When Moses came out of the house of Pharaoh and truly, for the first time saw the suffering of the enslaved Israelites, and also for the first time realized that they were his kin; when Moses reacted to the taskmaster's assault the way a pharaonic prince would react: by killing the taskmaster, sure in the notion that violence can only be defeated by greater violence; why did this ember of resistance not find dry kindling ready to burn for liberation?

This conversation waxed and waned all night long. Veering from the Egyptians to the Romans. Asking what it would take to convince an oppressed people that the first step towards liberation was not acquiescing in their oppression; that their first step must be to forcefully push back against the evil son and say: God took us out of Egypt to demonstrate that cruel oppression is wrong, that all are created in the image of God, that claiming that God cares for me and not for you is idolatry.

As the students knock on the door in the morning, in the dawning of new day, the look of decisiveness and love on their teachers' faces show that they are ready to act on the understanding that all are created in the image of God, that the first step to liberation is to purify oneself of Egypt, of the remains of the idea that some people are better than others, that some people should rule over others. I would urge that this year we all imagine ourselves into this latter conversation. Asking how many of us were fooled or convinced by the ideological evil that is white supremacy and anti-Blackness into being Pharoah, into being Egyptians. The point is not just to leave Egypt. The point is to understand how Egypt could have happened, and to make sure it never does again—while we are still in Egypt.

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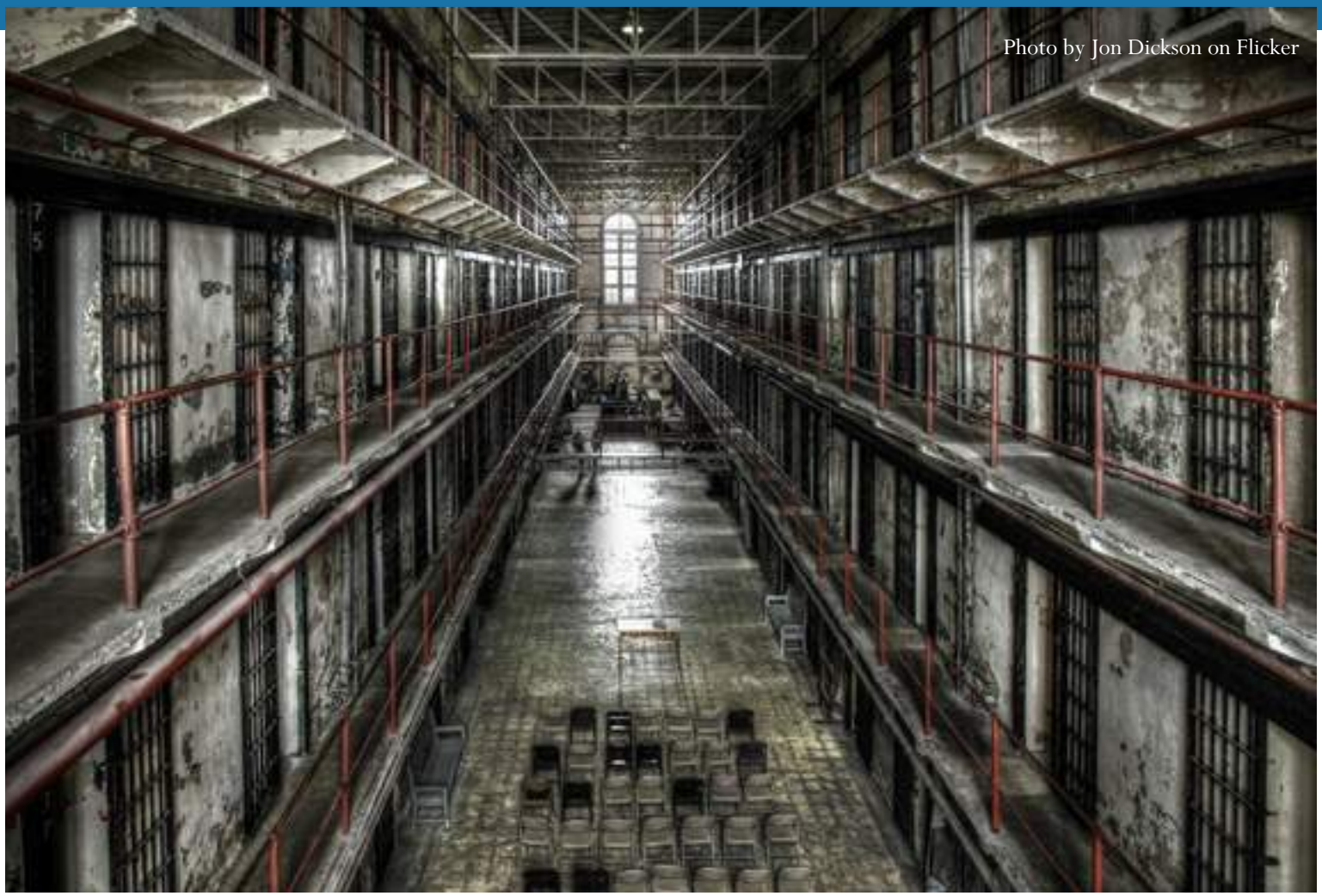
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Speaking Abolition Into Existence

ZACH WYNER

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When I first met Noél back in April of 2014, he didn't give me the time of day. I'd been waiting in a classroom in one of two maximum-security units at the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center. Posters of institutionally approved icons—Jesse Owens, MLK, Barack Obama—adorned the yellow walls; the previous week's math lesson was smeared across the whiteboard, a couple of cursory swipes having left the job of erasing it unfinished; the fluorescent lights buzzed like a nest of yellow jackets; half of the couple dozen desks were smashed against the back wall as though someone had shoved them aside to

make room for a fight.

I leaned against the wall beside the whiteboard and waited. I'd learned that, to maintain my dignity and avoid losing the respect of the participants, it was best to leave the classroom in whatever state I found it.

Upon entering, the majority of the dozen or so participants, having gotten to know me over the previous months, greeted me warmly and began putting the classroom back together, while the tall, handsome kid with a pompadour and a noticeable limp made a beeline for the back of the classroom and arranged two desks so they faced each other. Another kid with elaborate tattoos on the backs of his hands took the seat across from him and the pompadoured kid began dealing cards.

As I was giving my spiel to new participants, the med cart entered the common area just outside the classroom. Half of my workshop spied it through the window, sprang from their desks, fled the classroom and lined up for medications that would, over the course of the next thirty minutes, glaze their eyes, slur their speech and roll their heads back on their necks.

A few months into my time with The Beat Within, a program that conducts writing and conversation workshops primarily inside juvenile detention facilities, the lead facilitator at the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center (JJC) asked me if I'd been into prisons yet. When I said no, she said, "Oh, man. That'll be it for you. Once you get into prisons, you'll never leave."

It didn't take long in a San Quentin State Prison writing workshop for me to understand what she'd been talking about. After years of distance, when friends and family on the outside have been forced, to a large degree, to go on with their lives, prisoners become more absence than presence, more phantom than flesh. In the words of Angela Davis, "Prison doesn't disappear social problems, it disappears human beings."

But these men fight heroically—with words, weights, degrees, law, faith, art—to make something tangible of their phantom forms. To achieve themselves back into existence. So when we exit that space with their words in our heads and on our lips, their connections with us—the ones who shake their hands, laugh at their jokes, encourage and praise their literary efforts—can conjure their disappeared forms in the outside world. And when we return, it's as if that message of their existence has rebounded off something solid in the outside world and they can hear the echo. And they beam like my son did the first time an echo returned the sound of his own voice to his ears.

Incarcerated youth are a different story. Unlike the men and women in prison workshops, their attendance is often compulsory. Unlike the men and women in our prison workshops, even if they're recidivists, they're more likely to have been locked up in a single facility than to have been shuffled through half a dozen remote gulags, and in this single facility they're more likely to have had access to volunteer programming than to have spent months or years in solitary confinement. Unlike the men and women in prison workshops, they haven't worked to get here; this moment has been thrust upon them.

While the pills were doled out, I waited, chatting with a couple of boys about recent court dates. One of them said his mom hadn't been able to get off work and he'd faced the judge with no one but his attorney. The other complained about the D.A. Said he couldn't understand why she hated him so much, why she insisted on calling him "a menace" instead of using his name.

The pompadoured kid looked up from his card game. "Yo, Mr. Clean"—my baldness was a routine source of ridicule, as well as a good opportunity to model the ability to laugh at myself. "How much they pay you for this shit?" When I chuckled and told him that I was a volunteer, he said, "Ah, trying to build that resume for grad school."

"I already went to grad school."

"A job then?"

I shrugged. "I don't think so."

He snickered, looked at his cards, folded his hand. "Sure," he said, shuffling skillfully. "I see you."

I smiled. I didn't try to explain why I was there. It didn't matter. At least not yet.

Of course, there's always a back story. Mine involved reading people like Angela Davis, Michelle Alexander, George Jackson; it involved becoming romantically involved with a communist and being pushed to interrogate all my assumptions about how the world functioned; it involved becoming disenchanted with the private progressive school at which I'd taught, a place that signaled and espoused the right kind of values but seemed uninterested in engaging with struggles to correct the injustices it decried. It involved the gradual recognition of my complicity in a system of apartheid.

So I'd found The Beat Within, a volunteer writing program that places facilitators in juvenile detention centers and prisons and publishes participant work in a bi-monthly magazine. I knew that it was yet another sign of my privilege that I could volunteer my time to work with incarcerated youth, but I also knew that I loved kids. All kids. And I felt I owed it to incarcerated kids to give them something the institutions deliberately withheld: the opportunity to be seen as kids as opposed to criminals.

But I didn't say any of that to the pompadoured kid. Not yet anyway. If I'd said, I'm here to show you love, I would've been laughed out of the room. Show Don't Tell isn't just a lesson we teach young writers. It's praxis. And, by this point in my time at the Alameda County JJC, I knew well what showing up every week would create space for.

I led the workshop—reading aloud the week's prompts, facilitating a discussion, then asking the group to spend about 20 minutes writing before sharing their work with one another. During that 20 minutes, I kneeled beside individual participants and praised the parts of their writing that caught my interest, asked probing questions and encouraged them to add details, always more details. More than once, I felt the pompadoured kid's eyes on me. I let him be. The next move was his.

When I first began leading writing workshops for The Beat Within, I would leave the facility, get back in my car and yell and punch the steering wheel. It's something about kids in cages. When I think about suffocation, about struggling to breathe, it's the first place my mind goes.

When I'd exit that building, there'd be this tension tugging at my body like a riptide or the feeling that I'd forgotten something important. This tug located my soft places so that just walking out those doors, getting into my car and grabbing a burrito on the way home took practice—those first few times I did it, the food turned to rubber in my mouth.

Gradually, my insides hardened. Routine blunted the grief. I'd still recognize it from time to time in other, newer facilitators. Especially on those nights when the units were fetid with despair—when there'd been a fight, or someone was crying, or a young person was protesting a special program (euphemism for solitary confinement) by lying on the cold concrete floor

of their cell and kicking the door over and over and over and over.

When I first heard that sound, I thought it contained just about all anguish and anger in the entire world. Maybe it did. That didn't mean I wouldn't become inured to it.

But these days when, at the end of the week, I sit down with my incarcerated students' written words and type them up for submission to the magazine, liberating language from that cold building and dropping it into my warm home, the tension resurfaces so I feel it tugging again at those places I'd thought long since hardened.

A kid writes about the pain of separation from his girlfriend, due to give birth in three months' time.

Another writes of gratitude—he says that if he weren't locked up, he'd probably be dead.

A 14-year-old boy writes about his twin brothers, about the pain of missing their ninth birthday, about how he knows they look up to him and how he worries that they'll make the same mistakes he did. As if it's already over for him. Which, statistically at least, it is.

And the distance between me and grief collapses. And I'm right back in my years ago. And I feel, well beneath my bones, the truth of nothing ever changes.

But I push through because if these kids refuse to give in to despair, I have no right whatsoever to wallow in mine. I push through because I know the smile that waits to be unshackled, to stretch itself across a young face when I hand them the newest edition of the magazine and point to their words in print. I know that, through repetition, this validation can help unlock a belief in themselves that transcends cages.

By the end of the next week's workshop, Noél stopped playing cards and listened. By the beginning of the workshop after that, he left the cards outside the classroom and turned his desk toward me. That day, I abandoned the whiteboard, had the participants make a circle, and seated myself amongst them. Some of the younger ones dropped any pretense of participating, turned toward one another and cracked jokes. The others took turns reading and responding to the various prompts: "My Last Memorable Meal"; "What Irritates Me"; "If I Could Take Back One Thing."

I don't wanna write about these," Noél said after one participant had described the shrimp burrito he'd gotten a few months back from a Fruitvale taco truck.

I shrugged. "They're just suggestions. I didn't write any of them this week, so don't worry about offending me if you've got a critique."

He squinted at the paper. "I don't like the one about the one thing we'd take back."

I smiled because I'd felt the same way. The last thing these kids needed was to spend extra time thinking about and expressing regret. It went without saying that they'd take back whatever action landed them in detention. Of course, they would. But could they take back the conditions that led to that action? Of course, they couldn't.

I didn't say any of that, of course. Talking at young people never accomplishes much. If you want to help them write, it accomplishes even less.

"What don't you like about it?" I said.

"It assumes I did something wrong. But what if there wasn't no right thing? From where I was sitting, the wrong thing woulda been to do nothing."

I smiled. "So, you've got no regrets at all? Not even about that time you ordered the shrimp burrito when the carnitas was clearly the way to go?"

He laughed. "Shit. Maybe I got a few."

"Fuck this question," I said. Noél's eyebrows climbed his forehead. "Title your piece: No Regrets. Write about why you don't regret doing the thing that everyone says you should."

Noél smiled and nodded. At the end of the workshop, he told me he was taking his papers back to his room with him. The next week, he said he was still working on something, but that he was excited to share it soon. The week after that, he limp/sprinted across the common area, greeted me outside the classroom door and thrust half a dozen yellow legal pad pages into my hands. "That's my story," he said, his eyes stuck to the pages like a proud parent to their infant child. "My philosophy, I guess."

I turned the pages over, noted his impeccable handwriting filling the front and back of each page. "I can't wait to get home and read this."

He ran a hand through his hair. "You could read it now if you want. I'll get the workshop started, get these knuckleheads writing."

I smiled. "Deal."

I walked into the Unit 2 classroom in possession of two things: Noél's essay and a reminder of the most valuable lesson I've picked up in all my years as a teacher: the most essential thing we must give young people is not our knowledge but our attention, which is to say, our love. The question is not only how we've managed to build a system that withholds love, but how the system we've built has been capable of convincing us that the act of withholding somehow makes anyone safer.

Like most human interaction, in March of 2020, Beat Within writing workshops went virtual. Facilitators' two-dimensional faces, along with our bookshelves, artwork and unmade beds, remote as they may have been, offered workshop participants—kids who hadn't seen grass, sky, sun or clouds in weeks or months—glimpses of the world beyond concrete walls. Some would ask me to turn my computer around and point the camera out the window so they could admire the gnarled oak tree that showers leaves onto my back patio.

Many of the kids in the maximum-security unit went more than a year without touching, smelling, or embracing their family members. In place of in-person visits, through the magic of video conferencing, they were transported into their family's living rooms and cars, onto their balconies and stoops. But these communications, while essential, also inflicted an injury. Nestled within these glimpses of settings from which, like malignant growths, they'd been surgically removed, was a crystal clear vision—life going on without them.

We cannot grow in love unless we are immersed in love. And we cannot imagine the selves toward which we strive if the clearest vision afforded us is our absence. But the system cannot teach incarcerated youth to practice this kind of imagining, because to do so would mean hastening its own demise. Because love requires the dismantling of cages. Because a cage makes our absence feel inevitable. Which is ultimately what this system seeks to reproduce: their un-being.

We must facilitate a cultural growing-up. This begins with doing some imagining for incarcerated youth. It begins with naming and fighting for the world we must give them a chance to build bell hooks reminds us that, "What we cannot imagine cannot come into being." So, it falls to abolitionists, then, to imagine and speak this new world into existence.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore says, "Abolition is not about absence but about presence," reminding us that we are engaged in a process not of destruction but of creation. So it falls to us, then, to build life-affirming institutions from the ashes of those that have long extinguished it. It falls to us to fight as though the possibility of life and love hangs in the balance, so that we might manifest, for our young, a safe and sustainable world, and so we might realize, for us, relief from the ignominy of having shepherded such unspeakable violence.

It's been more than seven years since Noél penned "To The Understanding," and I'm sorry to say that, while I'm still facilitating workshops for The Beat Within at the Alameda County JJC, I lost touch with him long ago. If I could talk to him now, at some point in the conversation, I'd answer the first question he ever asked me: Why are you here?

In Noél's essay, he writes, "We are the state's cash cows, the reason why more prisons are being built than schools...The sooner we accept this reality, the sooner we can change it. After all, it is us who live under their control, us who kill each other, us who refuse to learn—but it's their traps into which we fall, it's their tools of death we're using."

I'd tell Noél that I was there because I was becoming an abolitionist, developing the kind of ties that would compel me to risk something real, and to convince others to risk something real, so the trap into which he fell and the tools of death he was taught to use might be melted down, forged into something generative.

I'd tell him that, beyond giving him my attention and my love, I was learning what we all must do in love's name.

We are all prisoners of a dream that was manufactured to pacify us, to encourage us to accept the smallest conceivable lives, to inhabit our smallest possible selves.

I'd tell Noél that I was there to know the hurt inflicted in the name of our mythology, so I might help persuade others to dream creatively, joyfully, expansively, lovingly, together, and inhabit larger selves than our cages could ever hope to contain.

ZACH WYNER is a writer and educator who works with incarcerated youth and adults in the San Francisco Bay Area. His debut novel, *What We Never Had*, was published in 2016 by Rare Bird Books. He is a contributor to Dime Show Review, The Good Men Project, Curly Red Stories, Unbroken Journal, Atticus Review and Your Impossible Voice. Zach received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of San Francisco and lives in El Cerrito, CA with his wife and children.

Timon Studler on Unsplash

The Social Sources of Trauma

RABBI MICHAEL LERNER

Trauma impacts nearly everyone in capitalist societies. This truth was at the heart of what we discovered at the Institute for Labor and Mental Health. It led us to create Tikkun as a vehicle to inform people about ongoing traumas and their impact on all of us. This trauma convinces people that nothing visionary is possible and that everyone just cares for themselves and hence can't be trusted to support you. In addition, everyone is taught the mythology that we live in a meritocracy. From these fallacies, we derive the absurd notion that our pains, disorders, struggles, insecurities, and failures to achieve our dreams (whether in our bodies, our minds, our intellects, our hearts, our spirits, or our economic status) are our own fault.

This generates self-blaming which intensifies the trauma most children experience growing up with parents and caretakers who themselves carry trauma from their work world or from simply living in a world filled with brutal wars, torture, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, hatred of Muslims, fear and hatred of transsexual people, hatred of people with different religions, skin colors, or nationalities. And if all this was not enough to create trauma, there is also the reasonable fear of nuclear war and the certainty of increasing destruction of the life support system of our planet Earth.

No wonder, then, that traumatized people turn to drugs, alcohol, hoarding of resources, crime,

and organizations and political parties that assure them that they are worthy of dignity and respect. This search for affirmation of one's humanity is often available in right-wing religious and political communities, even though it is at the expense of the humanity of others. Hence we are seeing a political party increasingly taken over by religious fanatics, and by people who advocate eliminating fundamental human rights contained in the U.S. Constitution.

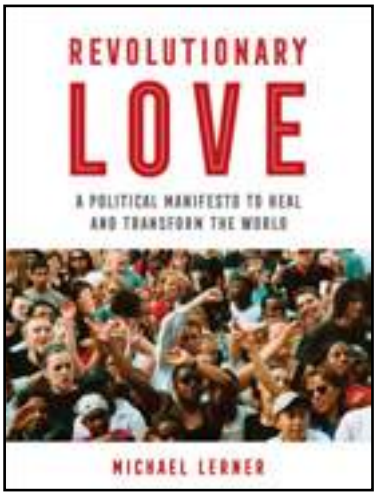
In addition to supporting a vigorous social justice agenda to uphold and expand fundamental human rights, we also need a huge new empathic movement promoting a vision of a society based on love, generosity, caring for each other, and caring for the earth. People need to feel cared for, that they matter, and that they deserve respect. Tikkun has been working for decades to help build a movement that gives equal attention to people's needs for respect and recognition as we do to advocating for people's material needs and human rights.

Why? Because it is impossible to win the expansion of human rights and redistribution of wealth without people feeling genuinely cared for and respected by a progressive movement. Sadly, many people do not experience that in progressive circles and/or the way those movements are portrayed in the media.

For people to feel safe in advocating for a significant transformation of society, they need to feel part of a movement that genuinely cares about them. This care needs to manifest in the daily lived experiences of the social change movements and not only with humane policies. You can learn more about how to do this and what it would look like by reading my book *Revolutionary Love*.

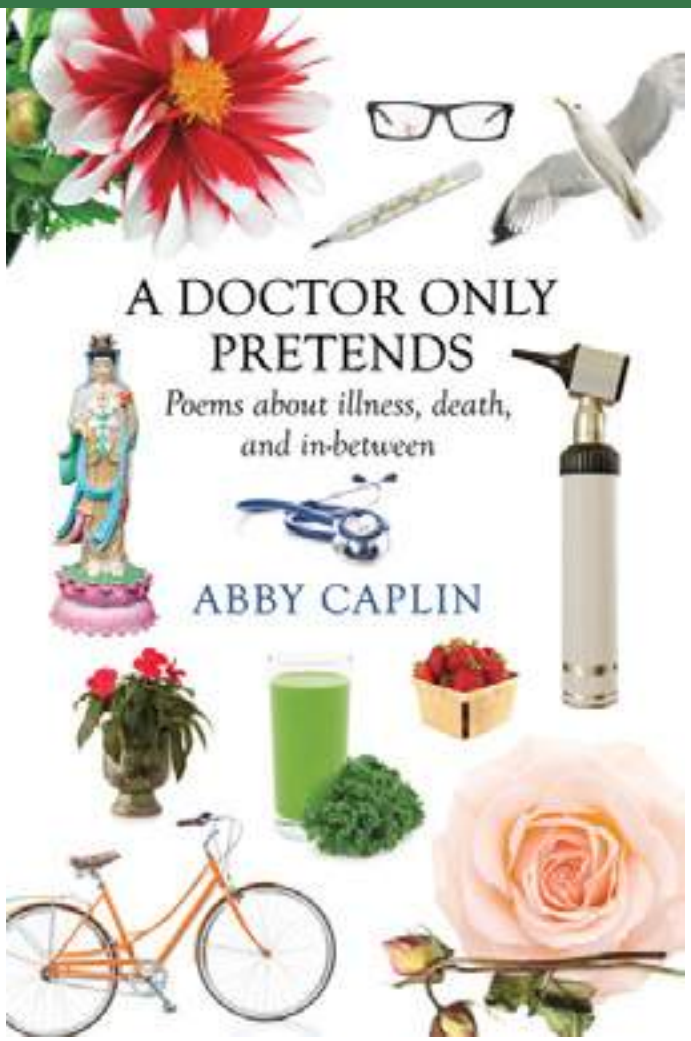
Please share these ideas with everyone you know.

RABBI MICHAEL LERNER holds a Ph.D. in philosophy (1972) and a second Ph.D. in psychology (1977), is editor of *Tikkun*, executive director of the Institute for Labor and Mental Health, rabbi of Beyt Tikkun Synagogue-Without-Walls in Berkeley, chair of the international Network of Spiritual Progressives, and author of 12 books, most recently *Revolutionary Love* published by the University of California Press (more info about this book at www.tikkun.org/lj).



A Doctor Only Pretends – A Review

MATTHEW LIPPMAN



Abby Caplin's new collection of poems, *A Doctor Only Pretends* has nothing to do with pretending and everything to do with music. I am not talking about the music of Beethoven or Drake, Omar Sosa or Maria Callas. I am talking about the music of medicine, of what it means to inhabit that professional space—to be human and God-like at the same time, perfect and flawed. Caplin explores both polarities and then the space in-between the two. What was it like to be a doctor before the pandemic? Then, to be in one in it? And now, of course, two years later, processing what? Burnout? Rage? Exhaustion? Love? These poems are that pop song and opera. They are a concert hall packed with patrons and they are the concert complete, basking in silence, listening.

At the center of this collection is a poem entitled "Meditation Workshop," that begins "Watch my mind barrel down a side trail," and concludes, "a feather marking the air like a maestro's baton." In between these two lines we get to see the poet's musicality of spirit, a celebration in half-notes and minor scales of the daily encounters of an MD—the toddlers clinging to bedrails, a woman in bed having trouble with breath, and the dead, sitting in chairs, smoking cigarettes. This is a book that celebrates not only the mellifluousness of notes but how those notes collide and, then, what happens in the aftermath of that collision. It's the bass drum smashing against the oboe and the guitar splitting into the flute. The maestro here is Dr. Caplin and the way in which she guides these poems into and out of one another to create something close to the human experience as perfectly bridled dissonance.

Here's the thing about these poems—they create desire. When you read one you want to read another. You want to hear another with your whole body because this is a collection of and about the body, one that whistles and weeps, one that dances and dies only to come back to life inside of itself, whole, with anger and sadness, a political power and a joust into the heart of fear. In her cento poem "Prelude to Pandemic," Caplin writes:

Forget the way men fall
down inside a lie—
the President has never

owned the rain.
How Satan must love to say
the name of God, must enjoy

holding aloft one middle finger.
Hard it has become to heal,
and to hold for your neighbor

the hysterical strength we must possess
to survive our very existence.

Damning as it is, the devil flashing the finger at all us, Caplin believes we have no choice but to hop the fence, slide under the doorjamb of the apartment next to ours, to visit our neighbor, to hold our neighbor, to offer ourselves out of this unimaginable plight in order to keep going. Deep in the muscles of these words, lines, stanza breaks, these poems implore us to keep going no matter the sadness of the e-minor missive trickling through the ether.

Inevitably, and most certainly abundant in these COVID-days, even in the face of death, we must continue forward and in our continuing forward we must recognize and we must praise the dead, know the dead, be with the dead as we glide and stumble into the kitchen, the garden, the subway, the Laundromat. Caplin knows this. In her poem "Kaddish Duplex (after Jericho Brown)" she writes:

Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead
doesn't praise or even mention the dead,

or tell you how to pray for your dead.
My father prayed in his laboratory,

prayed for sterile test tubes in his research lab.
Some love a spinning centrifuge.

Anyone who loves a spinning centrifuge
can hang an IV for twenty years.

He set up his wife's IV for twenty years
the way he sorted and filed junk mail.

The way he stopped cataloging junk mail.
The way the cat starved by the heating vent.

How it decayed by the heating vent.
For the dead, say Kaddish.

See, at the root of this book is the idea that you have to do the right thing. *The right thing*. That's what being a doctor is, at its essence. Sometimes all this means is to listen. Being present in the absence of everything else. It's the hard stuff. But, at the same time, this book is about just being a person on the earth, experiencing the daily grind. A doctor does not so much as pretend as they do live, like the rest of us. She debunks the divine pedestal that we give to our practitioners. What matters for her, what these poems sing, is that we all must say the prayer, be the prayer, in the daily grind, in the laboratory or behind the counter at Dunkin Donuts or under the chassis of a car changing the oil or hanging a spouse's IV in the same way we might sort and file junk mail. It's the daily Kaddish that doesn't mention the dead because living is too mundane and beautiful and the dead are in both, everywhere. Because only a doctor pretends to be a doctor but we are all doctors. We are the doctors who don't pretend and the poet is one of us, being present. That is our job so we can heal one another when the difficulty is upon us and it is always upon us. This is Caplin's message. It's the beauty of the collective spirit of these poems and we can hear it in her baton as it cuts the air.

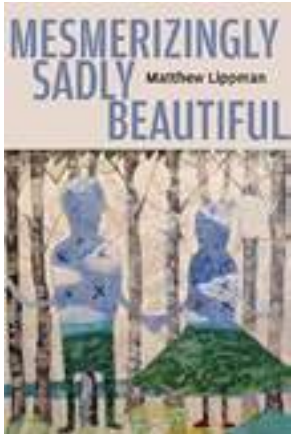
There is rest here, also, in this collection of poems. The fermata symbol. The voice that tells the musician, "Hey, hold up. Stay here for a second, extend this chord, catch your breath, let the listener bask in this moment before carrying on." Caplin knows how important it is to breathe, both as an act of physical survival and spiritual rejuvenation. Her poem "Years From Now," speaks to the power of the pause.

Near the outskirts of Bolinas, a woman offers me
a small pot of coral impatiens and leads me
into a large retreat house, where I choose a room
that faces cypress trees facing the ocean,
and I curl up in the pillowed quiet.
When she shows me the path to the driftwood
chapel, I find an altar of feathers, bones, shells,
a tall vase of fresh wildflowers, river stones etched
with names warming by the window. In my singsong
heart a campfire lights, where I toast marshmallows,
belt out *I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*,
and where a woman waits beside me
with a pot of coral impatiens.

Here we have the speaker—doctor, mother, spouse, citizen—in a period of repose. And in repose what does she do? She sings. Close to the cypress tree and the fresh vase of wildflowers, she sings and it is quiet. The silent space of taking time where Kaddish is sung into the ear of impatiens by the curled-up woman in the pillowed quiet. The breath, the air, the prayer. The force of this book is that these tropes extol all facets of doing the right thing in the face of the unimaginable crush of our daily machinations—pandemic or no pandemic. The poems explore the rubble and rust, the tenderness and finesse of a certain gratitude for simply 'being here.' In the poem, "On the Occasion of the Final Anatomy Exam," Caplin writes, "For our awe in working/the pulleys of your fingers and toes, the indignity/of dissecting your genitalia, we say thank you." *A Doctor Only Pretends* is grounded in a voice that sings. It's lyrical in its sonic quality and it bellows the backbeat of the heart. We want to live when we read and hear these poems. They are as essential as the heartbreak of the IV in the vein and the coastal drive from Big Sur that the speaker takes with her daughter, then, finds herself alone on an empty highway, thinking about a friend with a brain tumor while gliding past a row of strawberries.

Do the right thing. The right thing is to sing. *A Doctor Only Pretends* is both—the right thing and the song and Abby Caplin is the master maestro. This is a book of love, a song of love, a volume of accession and crescendo that pretends nothing. It says: *There are flowers out there. Go pick them*. It says: *Can you not see/that I am still alive,/waiting to be devoured?* Devour this book. It will make you more.

MATTHEW LIPPMAN is the author of seven poetry collections. His book *Mesmerizingly Sadly Beautiful* (2020) is published by Four Way Books. It was the recipient of the 2018 Levis Prize. His next collection, *We Are Sleeping With Our Sneakers On*, will be published by Four Way Books in 2024. Other titles include: *Salami Jew, American Chew, Monkey Bars*, *The New Year of Yellow*, and *A Little Gut Magic*. He has won numerous awards for his writing including: Michener Fellow, New York State Foundation of the Arts Grant, The Kathryn A. Morton Poetry Prize, and The Jerome Shestak Poetry Prize from The American Poetry Review. He has done a TEDx Talk: *Music Can Save The World*, as well as being featured on "All Things Considered" for his teaching of a Love Curriculum. Matthew Lippman taught High School English for 25 years.



American History

WILLA SCHNEBERG

From the Archives of Rani Bagai. Used with permission.

Vaishno Das Bagai died March 17, 1928.

Dr. Thind made history fighting to be Aryan. He was also my husband's godfather. Thind and his wife watched Robin, at four, while his mother was in labor; soon his sister's head would crest between her legs.

United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind went all the way to the Supreme Court. The justices agreed that although Thind was technically a member of the Caucasian race, he was not "Caucasian" in the popular sense of the word, so thus deemed "not white."

His citizenship was immediately revoked, and it became un-American for all South Asians, including Robin's grandfather, Vaishno Das Bagai, to be naturalized or categorized as a "free white person."

Vaishno's right to carry an American passport or own Bagai's Bazaar on Fillmore, which he had scrimped to establish, was dissolved like words on a wet piece of paper, and his reason to wear a three-piece suit, obliterated.

He booked a room in San Jose and wrote to his wife Kala, *Well dear, I have to leave you*, and turned on the gas.

I was raised with the phase: "No Blacks, Jews or dogs allowed," warning me that I shouldn't get too comfortable. Robin and I are comfortable together. Our hands often find the other, and when we sleep at night, we spoon.

You can also listen to the poet read this poem *here*

WILLA SCHNEBERG is a poet, ceramic sculptor, curator and psychotherapist in private practice, who founded and curates "Jewish Voices," an annual reading of Oregon Jewish Writers, now in its 23rd year. Her newest collection, *The Naked Room*, will be published by Broadstone Books this January. *https://willaschneberg.org/?work=672*

My Memories Live in my Mother's Phone

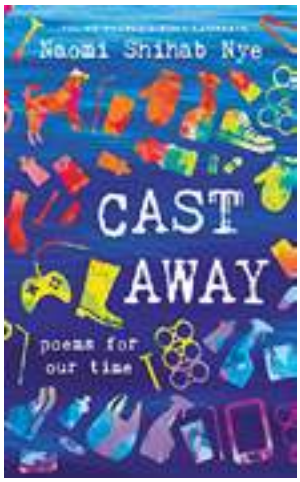
NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

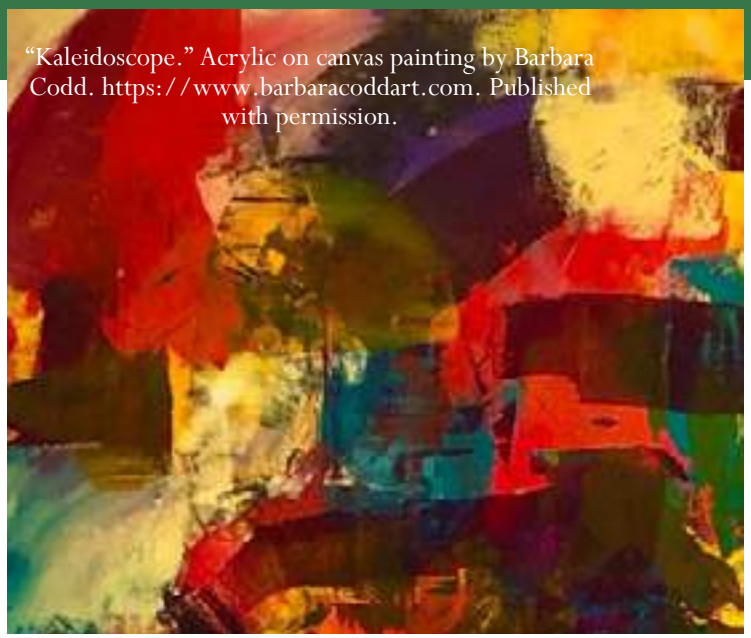
Ana Markovych on Unsplash

The poem's title is a quote from an Afghan girl in a Texas public elementary school, where the wide population of students represent more than 30 countries and no one is called a "refugee." They are called "newcomers."

Her dress shimmered tiny pink and green flower gardens
like a tablecloth in a rural twentieth century
American farmhouse, something tender
you never saw since you were a child too,
pleats and folds along the bodice,
tucks and stitchery made with a patience
that barely abides anymore, her hair tightly braided
and coiled in circles against her perfect head
with tiny red ribbons at elegant intervals,
but when you said, *Memories*, her face fell.
She whispered, we left them, we had to
leave everything in our house,
my cabinet, my doll, my books,
my pepper plant, my pillow.
Nothing now we knew before.
But we have a few pictures.
My memories live in my mother's phone.

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE is the Young People's Poet Laureate (Poetry Foundation) and her most recent books are *Everything Comes Next, Cast Away*, and *The Tiny Journalist*. In 2020, she received the Ivan Sandrof Award for Lifetime Achievement from The National Book Critics Circle.





"Kaleidoscope." Acrylic on canvas painting by Barbara Codd. https://www.barbaracoddart.com. Published with permission.

That Time of Month in America

DEB BUSMAN

I'm 68 years old and I am bleeding. Not bleeding like Jayland Walker, shot 60 times by police in Ohio last week. Not bleeding like the 30 plus people killed or wounded today in that 4th of July rah rah America, land of the free, parade in Illinois. Not bleeding like the elementary school kids and teachers in Uvalde, Texas, last month, or the victims of the 300 plus other mass shootings in this country. Just. This. Year.

No, I'm not Ukrainian soldier bleeding, or Palestinian child rock in hand bleeding, or back alley abortion bleeding. I'm not gay bashed bleeding, trans bashed bleeding, line all the homosexuals up in a row and shoot them in the back of the head bleeding. I'm not even a California Lovers Point shark bite bleeding, or a fall off your bike, or accidentally cut yourself making potato salad bleeding.

Nah, I'm just good ol' lady business, on the rag, it's that time of month kind of bleeding. Which millions of uterus-bearing folx all over the world do on the regular. Which I used to do on the regular. Which is totally normal, except that I am 68 freaking years old and Aunt Flo hasn't come around for more than 20 years, so what the fuck is happening anyway?! Why am I sitting on the toilet now gushing blood, bright red blood, dark clotty blood, this is not a metaphor, I'm too old for this shit blood?

And of course, I don't have any gear, because who keeps that shit in their house anyway when you haven't bled for, have I mentioned, over 20 years? But I do have plenty of gauze and bandages in the bathroom cabinet, and some two-sided carpet tape in my toolbox, so I jerry rig some pads together and make do. Which is kind of funny because when I was a kid the neighbor boys and I used to sneak in to steal our mom's sanitary pads and tampons when we got regular kid hurt because we'd discovered that, strapped on with a little bit of duct tape, they stopped the bleeding like nothing else. Until one day when Jack, who was the oldest boy, said, "Stop doing that shit. It's nasty."

But now I'm old and I'm bleeding and there are no pads in the house, and I'm more than a little freaked out because I've never heard of this happening and, damn, are these cramps? Fuck, I haven't had cramps forever. How the hell do people live with this shit every freaking month and just go on about our day? No wonder cis-men are so afraid of our power. Who else can bleed without dying, create other humans inside their bodies, and then feed those newly birthed beings. With milk. From our bodies. But I am not feeling particularly powerful and, once I get myself all McGyvered up with my jerry rigged pads, I do exactly what I know better than to do, which is to go online and Google 'post-menopausal bleeding.' Which is a really stupid idea because who the hell wants to panic stress about endometrial cancer when

the likelihood is that this is all about my sweet naturopathic doctor recently tweaking my bio-identical hormones.

But now since I'm online I see they have a suspect in the parade shooting and I know he must be white because they are not mentioning race or terrorism. And yep, for sure he is because wow, they just took him into custody "without incident," all alive and not bleeding, not shot 60 times like Jayland Walker, and oh look, what a surprise, now there is a photo of this white boy suspect at a Trump rally and reports of him casing out a synagogue back in April.

I wonder if the cops will stop by Burger King and grab him a snack like they did with Dylann Roof after he murdered nine Black churchgoers in Charleston. For sure they are not going to put him handcuffed, no seatbelt, in the back of an empty police van, then slam on the breaks, giving him a 'rough ride' like they did to Randy Cox last month, leaving him in intensive care, now paralyzed from the neck down.

And what is it about insecure guys and their penis guns and creepy rage anyway? And how weird is it that I am menstruating, or whatever the fuck this is, days after the sexual predator infested Supreme Court overturns Roe v Wade, like some strange sort of social/psychic historical time warp bleed-through, as reproductive rights are once more under siege and a 10-year-old child rape victim gets denied medical care in Ohio, women are now referred to as 'vessels,' and there is talk of using 'pregnancy sniffing dogs' at airports and train stations to prevent women from crossing state lines.

And now, as I change into my third McGyvered pad, I think about that 10-year-old girl in Ohio, and I think about young Miah Cerrillo, the 11-year-old survivor of the Uvalde school attack, who covered herself in her friend's blood and played dead so the shooter wouldn't kill her, too. I think about her testimony before Congress last month and how it has horrified and haunted me ever since, and not just regular horrified for the obvious reasons, but deep cell body memory horrified because her story reminds me of me. It reminds me of the other damn story I've been trying to write all month, the piece about race, privilege, and police violence, about triggered, surfacing memories of sexual assault, the story that made me start to cry when I tried to read part of it out loud to my workshop group last week.

Because I was once that terrified girl, and covering myself with blood was what I did, too. Except that it was not my friend's blood that I smeared all over myself for survival in that filthy Iowa jail cell a half a century ago; it was my own blood, and not just the cut over my eye from that boot to the face blood, but also my own 16-year-old terrified girl menstrual blood. As those men assaulted me that day, ultimately it was not my kicking, spitting and biting, my yelling and screaming and physical fighting that saved me from being raped. It was my blood, my menstrual blood and my madness, smeared all over my crazed face and chest that frightened them off as I crouched backed into a corner snarling.

It was not some right-wing boy/man incel with an AR 15 that was the threat that day. It was the police that I needed to be rescued from, and wasn't, the police who held the guns, the rage, the hatred and fear of all things female. Or not female enough. Or black or brown trans female. Or female like me, cis, butch and white, because sometimes even whiteness is not enough to protect when cops decide that "all that dyke bitch needs is a good fuck."

It's that time of month and America is bleeding, and bloodying. And Jayland Walker is dead. Amariey Lej is dead. Tatiana Labelle, Paloma Vazquez, Duval Princess dead. And in these times of intersectional bloodbath, rough rides

and legislative assault, pregnancy sniffing dogs and protected Proud Boy Klansmen in khakis and white gaiters, exactly who and what is being served and protected? And what ancestral wisdoms and visionary tactics, individual and collective, ancient and future, shall now be forged into resistance?

DEBRA BUSMAN is a writer and Professor of Creative Writing and Social Action at CSU Monterey Bay. She is the author of the novel *Like a Woman*, co-editor of the award-winning anthology *Fire and Ink: An Anthology of Social Action Writing*, and has contributed chapters to *Combined Destinies: Whites Share Grief Around Racism; Readings in Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration; and Ways of Being in Teaching*.

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We Have Always Done This

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JUDITH ARCANA

The moon rises, glowing silver-white.
The old woman watches it rise.
Standing in the grass of the meadow, looking up over the trees, she watches the moon rise.

On this night, for this moon, she is standing there.
She has been called to welcome the moon.
She has been called to talk with the young ones.

She will tell them: We have always known this; we have always done this.

Some have the skill in their hands.
Some grow the herbs. Some carry the tools.
Some chant, beat the drums, rock their bodies under the moon.

We do this now, she will tell them. We have always done this.
This is in our blood.
Our blood is in you, she tells the young ones.

We must know when to do this. We must know when not to do this.
Dream and dance and think, together.
Dream and dance and think, alone.

Ask the moon in her narrow crescent, and as she grows, rounding.
Answers will be luminous in the silver-white light of the moon.
Answers will be shadows in the moon's dark time.

We can make life, and break it.
We tend life, and can end it.
Always, we ask: Is now the time for this life?

You will decide, she tells the young ones: Always, you will decide.

JUDITH ARCANA is a writer of stories, poems, essays and books -- and she's a Jane, a member of Chicago's pre-Roe abortion underground. So of course she has written stories, poems, essays and books that feature abortion as a subject; *visit judithcarcana.com*.

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